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ACADEMY'S SECOND SEAT

– 아카데미 차석이 되었다 –

- VOLUME 2 -

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[RAEI TRANSLATIONS]

CHAPTER 49
SUMMER VACATION (1)

I stepped outside to say goodbye to Rie, as she hopped into her carriage.

The holidays had started and everyone was heading back to their homes, one after the other.

Astina had already taken off, and Rie was on the verge of leaving after spending an extra day at the academy.

"Remember to write to me often. Don't forget."

"I know. Now off you go."

Before she took off, Rie reminded me several times.

She was planning on sending me updates about the political situation and other news, so she wanted me to write back if anything went down at the academy.

I questioned if that was really necessary, but she was pretty adamant.

She argued that since odd incidents happened at the academy all the time, we needed to be ready for something to happen during the break as well.

She piled up so many reasons that all I could do was nod in agreement.

After all, writing a letter wasn't too hard.

"Rudy, should we head back in now?" Luna asked, standing by my side.

She had joined me in seeing Rie off.

Luna also chose to stay at the academy over the break.

I suggested she take a trip home before the special lectures held over the break

started, but she said no.

She felt it was best to focus on her studies.

"Then I'm off to get some exercise. See you later."

"Sure! I'll meet you at the cafeteria later!"

Luna headed for the library, and I set off for the field.

Now that my injuries were on the mend, it was time to get moving.

I had been laying off physical activity for a while and I could feel my body getting sluggish and my energy levels dropping.

"Well… let's get this started."

And so, I began my run on the field.

It felt odd to be running after such a long break.

My joints ached, my breath was short, and my body was screaming for me to stop.

But I pushed all that aside and ran on.

After a while, the pain just sort of fades away.

I found myself running in a kind of trance.

During my run, I noticed someone watching me.

A muscular man was eyeing me from a bench, a huge double-bladed axe by his side. If I had to describe him, I'd say 'barbarian.'

A fearsome-looking barbarian, bloodthirsty, lethal.

But the real shocker was that he was wearing the academy's uniform.

He had rolled up the sleeves of his unbuttoned shirt.

Looking at his biceps, I wondered if those buttons ever stood a chance.

The idea of a student with that face and those muscles gave me chills.

Was he a part of the Swordsmanship Department?

Did all students in that department turn out like this?

"Huff…"

Once I finished my workout, I wiped away my sweat.

It felt like I'd been exercising for quite a while.

Still, the barbarian was watching me.

Now, I was starting to feel uncomfortable.

What was his deal?

Why was he staring at me like that?

Sure, some people would glance my way during their workouts, but no one had ever gawked at me quite like this before.

While I was busy trying to figure out his intentions, the man rose from his spot and started walking in my direction.

Was he planning to jump me?

I quickly dismissed the thought.

If he wanted to ambush me, he wouldn't just sit in plain sight; he would've hidden somewhere.

So what was he up to?

Before I could puzzle it out, he was standing right in front of me.

I thought he might simply walk past, but he stopped, looking down at me.

Then he started talking.

His question took me by surprise.

"Do you study under Professor Robert?"

“…What?"

"Are you a student of Professor Robert? You're Rudy Astria, right?"

He had a deep, booming voice that matched his build.

"Yes… But why?"

Then, he extended his hand toward me.

"I'm Borval, a second-year student in the Magic Department."

I stared blankly at his outstretched hand.

"Do you not shake hands with commoners?”

"No, that's not it."

Caught off guard, I took his hand and shook it.

“You run well. I heard you had been bedridden for a while.”

"Ah, yes. Thank you."

Following our brief exchange, an awkward silence fell between us.

I guessed he must have had a reason for approaching me, so I asked.

"Did Professor Robert send you?"

"Not exactly. But it's related."

That response left me more confused.

"We'll talk more later."

With that, Borval left.

"But… He's in the Magic Department?"

A guy with that face and physique is in the Magic Department?

And why does he carry around that massive axe?

It felt like my image of the Magic Department was crashing down.

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"You're here?"

When I entered Professor Robert's office, I found Borval and Robert waiting for me.

Professor Robert, seated at his desk, began to talk.

"I hear he sought you out of his own accord, though I didn't ask him to."

"Huh?"

"Just wanted to see what kind of person he is."

Borval responded to Professor Robert's comments.

With an irritated look, Professor Robert kept talking.

"Well, you met this guy earlier, right? I've taught him a bit."

"So… he's senior?"

At that, Professor Robert grimaced.

"What do you mean, senior? Neither of you are my students."

The criteria Professor Robert uses to determine his students remains a mystery.

Does he even officially have any students?

Nonetheless, after hearing it repeatedly, I've gotten used to hearing it.

"Why did you call on Borval senior?"

"He's going to be teaching you for a while."

As I asked, Professor Robert passed me a book.

"This is…"

"The contents of that book. Research related stuff on your own."

The book was filled with information about Luna's book.

"Isn't this what you were studying, Professor Robert?"

"Don't worry, there's another copy."

After giving me the book, Professor Robert gestured at Borval.

"I've got to head out in a week, so you'll be learning from this guy. Until I leave, I'll supervise as well."

"Where are you heading?"

As far as I'm aware, Professor Robert doesn't have any family, and I didn't think he had other commitments.

"Don't pry too much. Just know that I have somewhere to be."

Acknowledging Professor Robert's words, I turned to Borval.

"But, Borval Senior, you're about to become a third-year. Won't you be busy?"

"I'm aiming to be a professor, so it's not an issue."

"Ah…"

Aiming to be a professor.

In other words, he was on track to become a graduate student, a teaching assistant.

Upon hearing that, I couldn't help but feel a lump form in my throat.

Walking into hell on his own.

"Well… hang in there."

“…What are you implying."

"Quit the small talk and start teaching him magic."

At Professor Robert's command, Borval nodded and turned to me.

"I've heard your magic skills are impressive. How proficient are you?"

"Well… I can use about 3-4 kinds of black magic. I know how to use various kinds of beginner magic, but my proficiency is low."

"That's remarkable for a first-year."

Borval pulled out a piece of paper and pitched a question at me.

"Do you have a considerable understanding of magic, then?"

"I do have a good grasp of basic magical theory."

I said, filled with confidence.

I've been studiously learning the theoretical aspects since joining the academy.

I considered myself among the top tier of first-year students when it came to theory.

At the start of the semester, I was casting spells without any understanding of the underlying principles.

But as I continued practicing magic, it was natural that I became curious about its mechanics and started noticing the areas where I was lacking.

Theoretical knowledge filled in those gaps.

Diving into the theory, one learns about the limitations of magic and efficient methods of use.

These theories greatly boosted my learning speed.

So, I had been enhancing my magic skills through a balanced combination of theory and practice.

"Let me put a question to you, then. What distinguishes the mana of a knight from that of a wizard?"

“…A knight?"

"I misspoke. It isn't exclusive to knights. It encompasses all who wield weapons."

I fell into a moment of thought.

This was not something I had studied.

Usually, we learn theories that can be easily applied to practical situations rather than explaining such fundamental aspects.

Nevertheless, based on what I had learned so far, I could formulate a guess.

“…They are the same?"

The mana employed couldn't be different.

Otherwise, entities like Evan, a magic swordsman, couldn't exist.

"That's correct. The mana used is identical. So, what distinguishes a knight from a wizard?"

"A knight wields sword aura, and a wizard wields magic."

The contrast between a knight and a wizard.

The biggest difference is that wizards cast magic while knights utilize sword aura.

However, there was a strange point.

The existence of a magic swordsman.

A magic swordsman is a being that can use both.

This implies wizards could wield sword aura, and knights could cast magic.

Still, something felt off.

Why don't wizards use sword aura?

The field of magic is vast and complex.

It's understandable to think knights would forgo learning it.

Using basic magic would likely be less efficient in actual combat than an additional sword swing.

If one truly wanted to incorporate magic into combat, utilizing scrolls would be more advantageous.

Before I could answer, Borval posed another question.

"There is one more thing that's different."

Another difference…

I sank into thought.

The only knight I was acquainted with was Locke…

Ah.

Come to think of it, I had seen another knight.

Harpel and Eric.

"Body reinforcement?"

The reason they survived Astina's onslaught.

It was due to body reinforcement.

However, a knight's body reinforcement differs from a wizard's body reinforcement magic.

"You're certainly talented. These aren't topics typically taught in the first year. You're correct. This is the most significant difference between wizards and knights."

Borval sketched a human figure on the paper in front of him.

"So, why is there such a difference?"

I mused for a moment before responding.

"I… I'm unsure."

Borval dotted the heart of the figure he sketched on the paper.

"Wizards amass mana in their hearts."

He then drew another figure and dotted various parts of the body.

"Knights, on the other hand, distribute mana throughout their bodies."

Borval proceeded with his explanation.

"This discrepancy arises because the usage of sword aura and magic differs. Let's take dark magic as an example. How do you cast dark magic?"

"In my case, I envision a container and fill it with mana."

"Exactly, you conjure that image to extract a specific amount of mana. Forming such an image simplifies the process."

Borval traced a line on the figure with the marked heart.

"A wizard must manage a precise amount of mana to cast spells. It's far more accurate and efficient to use mana concentrated in one place rather than gathering it

from all over the body as a knight would. Hence, this method is preferred."

I nodded in understanding.

But why is he telling me this?

"You said you wanted to learn powerful magic from Professor Robert. Magic that can be used as a finishing blow."

Perhaps my thoughts were obvious because Borval spoke first.

A finishing move.

The lack of a finishing move was a disadvantage I felt during the last fight.

So, I requested Professor Robert to teach me, and it appears he relayed my request to Borval.

"Frankly, given your current skill level, there's no magic that I can teach that could be called a finishing move. Your current level is simply too low."

"Is that so?"

Although I was a bit disheartened hearing this, knowing that I had only been attending the academy for a year, I nodded in agreement.

"However, it's not like there's absolutely no way. This technique will also be helpful with dark magic, and it's my specialty, so I'll explain in detail."

Upon hearing that, my expectations rose.

"I'm looking forward to it."

CHAPTER 50
SUMMER VACATION (2)

Once Rudy's training wrapped up, only Borval and Professor Robert remained in the lab.

"What do you think?"

"He seems more ordinary than I thought."

There are plenty of geniuses in the world.

These geniuses usually have little quirks.

Maybe they're obsessed with a specific topic, or they have unusual habits.

Though these quirks differ, one trait is common among them all.

Pride.

Rudy had potential that went beyond Borval's.

Given more time, Rudy would outdo him.

Yet he wasn't looking down on him.

Instead, it felt like Rudy held him in high regard.

And for a prodigy, his learning pace wasn't especially quick.

Like any average person, he made mistakes while trying to put what he'd learned into practice.

So, he didn't appear extraordinary.

Still, Borval noticed something.

Rudy's determined expression as he raced across the field.

Despite it being his first physical session after a long period of rest, he didn't stop.

Borval came to a realization.

Rudy Astria wasn't a natural-born prodigy of the Astria family.

His accomplishments so far weren't due to innate talent.

You could see it in his eyes when he learned something new or trained.

A young man filled with ambition and determination.

It was thanks to his drive that he is where he is now.

"He's interesting," Borval said, to which Professor Robert responded with a small smile.

"I think so too."

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After learning from Borval, I grabbed lunch with Luna and then headed to my lab.

Even though I couldn't use the lab from the next term onwards, it was mine until the end of the break.

I reflected on what Borval had taught me.

"Controlling mana…"

Borval taught me about mana control.

Physical enhancement spells only amplify things like muscles, unlike the complete enhancements knights undergo.

Borval offered a new perspective.

Could wizards distribute mana throughout their bodies like knights, and achieve

complete physical enhancement?

It was possible, but very challenging.

The fundamental difference between a wizard and a knight was in the mana flow.

Also for knights, the form of mana was important, not the amount.

The Sword Aura of a Knight.

When knights use sword aura, they don't worry about the amount of mana they're using.

Sure, they can adjust it.

But sword aura doesn't demand precise control over the amount of mana.

Knights focus not on controlling the amount of mana, but rather on the form of the mana.

They roughly draw out a certain amount of mana and then refine it.

Sharpen it to the point it can slice through anything.

Knights are those who perfect the form of the mana.

But wizards are different.

Wizards emphasize managing the amount of mana, not its form.

They construct a spell, a kind of container, and inject the right amount of mana into it.

When filling a container with water, you don't worry about the shape to pour it in.

After all, the water will naturally take on the shape of the container.

So, they only need to measure the exact amount.

Wizards find it almost impossible to use physical enhancement because of this.

To spread mana throughout the body like a knight, a wizard must learn to maintain mana in a form that fits the human body.

But while a wizard knows how to send mana to areas like the hands or feet, they struggle to control the form of the mana.

This led me to a question.

Why not see the body as a container and only fill a certain amount?

-A human body cannot be a vessel. If mana is not controlled to the shape of the human body, it keeps trying to move.

-Then the mana would either try to leave the body or return to the heart.

There were several other reasons as well.

But in short, wizards do not enhance their bodies for the same reason knights do not use magic.

It's more efficient to use magic than to learn to finely control mana to enhance the body.

-What if there is a way to strengthen the body in a way only wizards can do?

-Knights spread mana all over their body, enhancing everything. They're not skilled in gathering mana at one point.

-But wizards are different.

-Collecting mana in one place is a wizard's specialty.

Borval lifted one arm.

-What if you only strengthen this one arm without strengthening the rest of the body?

Hearing that, my eyes lit up.

Since wizards already gather all of the mana in their heart, things changed if they

only thought about strengthening one arm.

Fill the arm with mana, then explode it out through the arm.

No need to continuously maintain it in your arm like a knight would, but expend all of it alongside a swing.

Then, you could use an unbelievable amount of power explosively.

It's literally a special move.

A technique used to land a decisive blow.

It requires delicate mana movement.

You must be able to move mana at least enough to make it the shape of an arm to exhibit this ability.

And since such delicate mana movement was necessary, it also helped with dark magic.

Dark magic is a kind of magic that requires an exact amount of mana for each spell.

By learning how to delicately move mana, you also increase dark magic proficiencies.

"Shall we start now?"

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A week later.

"Then I'll be off."

As Professor Robert had mentioned earlier, he said he was heading off somewhere and left.

By now, I could somewhat control mana.

I hadn't yet succeeded in creating a shape like an arm, but I could channel mana into my fist.

However, when I used it in just my fist, it didn't feel very powerful.

Even if my fist became stronger, it couldn't generate a lot of explosive power.

After my morning workout and learning from Borval, I walked to the practice field.

A reinforced training dummy was set up.

It was a tool to estimate the force of a technique.

Striking the dummy didn't give an exact measure of the force, but it did provide a rough estimate.

Lately, I've been practicing mana control by hitting this dummy.

When I infused the same amount of mana into my arm and hit the dummy, if the force was strong, it meant the mana was properly distributed. If the force was weak, it was the opposite.

Since it was difficult to tell if mana was properly distributed normally, this was the method I adopted.

That's how I began to familiarize myself with the feeling of correct distribution.

When I entered the training ground, I noticed someone else was already there.

A figure with familiar black hair stood there.

It was Evan.

"Oh…"

I suddenly remembered that Evan, too, was spending his holidays at the academy.

I had completely forgotten about him.

But I quickly compose myself and move forward.

Casually, I picked up the training dummy and cast a sidelong glance at him.

He was focused on his sword practice, occasionally incorporating magic.

"No need to be so cautious…"

I murmured softly, too low for Evan to hear, then focused.

I channeled mana into my arm.

I didn't flood it with a vast amount of mana right from the start.

Controlled mana distribution.

After all, the day was still long.

If I exhausted my mana in a single burst and ended up tired before the day was over, it would be counterproductive.

"This should do…"

I positioned my arm and struck the dummy.

-Thud

"Ah!"

A sharp pain shot through my fist, as if the mana hadn't reached it properly.

Tears sprang to my eyes, and my hand throbbed, but I clenched my teeth and endured it.

I couldn't let Evan, who was behind me, see me squirming in pain.

Honestly, it wasn't just because of Evan.

The mere thought of someone seeing me punch a dummy and then roll around in pain was so embarrassing that I was simply fighting the discomfort.

I swallowed the threatening tears and drew a deep breath.

"Ugh… Huff!"

Bracing myself, I began hitting the dummy again.

This cycle repeated several times.

Sometimes, I controlled it just right; other times, it was far from it.

"Sigh……”

Perhaps I should try this a couple more times and then leave.

A significant amount of time had passed, and I couldn't spend the entire day here.

I turned my gaze to Evan.

He was showing no intentions of leaving.

"He's diligent……”

Watching him, I felt great relief.

He seemed to be progressing well on his own.

Redirecting my attention, I focused on channeling mana into my arm.

Infusing my arm with mana…

I needed to remember that feeling.

The feeling of mana permeating every muscle…

This time, it felt like things were falling into place.

Like I could hold more mana.

I channeled a larger amount than usual.

Eyes fixated on the dummy, I lifted my fist.

And then, I swung.

Unleashing all the mana contained within my arm…!

-Kwaaaang!!!!!

"Huh…?"

I stared at the dummy in disbelief.

My fist had gone right through it.

Furthermore, extensive scars marred the ground before it.

"……"

Dumbfounded, I stared at my own fist.

Then, I cautiously lifted my gaze to Evan.

His face was a picture of astonishment, his eyes wide and mouth agape.

"……"

Keeping my cool, I casually collected my stuff and left the training ground.

Despite maintaining my composure on the outside, inside, I was flustered.

So much so that I practically sprinted out of the training ground.

"……That's not going to be a problem, right?"

Even if Evan had seen it, there should be no consequences, right?

Instead, demonstrating my growth could kindle Evan's own development, I rationalized.

Just then, I heard the sound of someone racing behind me.

"Rudy Astria."

It was Evan.

Evan was calling out my name as he gave chase.

What's going on?

Keeping a calm façade, I turned to face him.

"What is it?"

At this, Evan returned an awkward grin and began to speak.

"Well… the Swordsmanship Department's professor has been asking about you. Seems he's trying to identify the person who broke the training dummy…"

"Ah…!"

So, that's how I ended up being escorted to the professor…

"What, you're the one who destroyed the training dummy? Who are you?"

"I, I'm sorry…"

After telling them my name and apologizing several times, I was finally allowed to exit the training field.

CHAPTER 51
SUMMER VACATION (3)

On a bright afternoon, with flowers in full bloom, Professor Robert walked along a sunlit path.

His destination: two lonely graves.

When he arrived, he greeted the graves with a small smile.

"Are you both doing well?"

Standing alone, he gently placed the flowers he'd brought before each one.

"I apologize for not visiting more often."

His smile remained, but a subtle sadness tinged its edges.

"Being a professor isn't as relaxed as you might think."

He confessed to the graves, his voice laced with bitterness.

"I've been teaching a young one from the Astria family these days."

He continued.

"He reminds me of Richard's younger days."

A sigh slipped from him.

"Do you remember how you were as a child, Richard?"

The question hung in the air, unanswered.

Overcome with emotion, Professor Robert sank to the ground, his head cradled in his hands.

"I should have never taken you on as my student, Richard…"

-

"I'm coming with you," Luna stated, her eyes fixed on me as I packed my belongings.

The journey to the Persia territory was scheduled for tomorrow.

I just told Luna about it today.

We often shared meals, but somehow I'd never found the right moment to bring it up.

Now, the situation had caught her off guard.

"I want to join you!" Luna stood with her hands on her hips, feigning anger.

I tried to reason with her.

"What about your classes with Professor McGuire?"

For me, I had already told Borval and, in the absence of Professor Robert, I was free to roam around, but Luna wasn't.

The special lecture she attended was closely managed by Professor McGuire.

Luna, usually an impeccable student, would risk upsetting him if she decided to leave for a trip out of the blue.

I've seen his explosive temper once and I have no desire to provoke it again.

I couldn't ask Luna to lie about it.

Not only was she terrible at lying, but it wouldn't have been helpful in this situation.

If it had been more of a vacation, I would've been more than happy to take Luna along.

But since this was a brief visit to the Persia family's residence and nothing more, I thought it was better for her to remain at the academy.

"I promise I'll get you something. Stay here at the academy, okay?"

Luna's face fell.

"I don't want to, I want to come with you…"

Despite understanding the difficulties, Luna's protest continued.

Perhaps the academy was taking a greater toll on her than I'd thought.

"I'll be back before you know it. Just focus on your studies."

Luna fidgeted with her fingers, her eyes on me.

Seeing her like this, a faint smile crossed my face.

"Luna, you'll be okay on your own, right?"

"I'm not a child," she huffed, but her face was undoubtedly that of a little girl's.

Her stubborn nod was so reminiscent of a puppy soaked from the rain that I had to stifle my laughter.

I knew an outburst would likely upset her, so I kept my amusement to a mere smile.

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The following morning arrived, and I was up at the crack of dawn.

I boarded a carriage bound for the Persia territory.

The early start was tiring, but I managed to catch up on some sleep during the journey.

By the time we reached our destination, it was late lunchtime.

"Welcome, Rudy Astria," greeted Astina as I stepped off the carriage.

Seeing her in such informal clothing was an unfamiliar sight; I was used to her school uniform.

"What have you been up to?"

"Do you think I would have been doing anything other than studying?"

"Well, that sounds like you."

Astina said, laughing.

"My father is waiting inside. Have you eaten yet? We were waiting for you."

"You could have eaten earlier."

"How could we have started without our guest? Let's go inside and chat."

With that, I followed Astina into the building.

The Persia family mansion was astonishingly luxurious.

Instead of the white lilies of Astria, here, vibrant red roses were the prominent feature, perhaps in representation of the family's emblem.

The mansion was comparable in size to the Astria's.

Being closer to the capital, Astria's size was to showcase the family's power.

A mansion of this scale was a rare sight.

Inside, we were greeted by a middle-aged man.

"Is this Rudy Astria?"

He was Philip Persia, Astina's father and the head of the Persia family.

A renowned figure, he held the rank of a viscount, wielding considerable political and commercial power, even without any prowess in magic or swordsmanship.

"Hello. I'm Rudy Astria."

I responded politely, managing to conceal any surprise at the informal greeting.

"I'm Philip Persia, head of the Persia family. Please, take a seat. We'll chat over lunch."

At Philip's invitation, a servant guided me to a chair.

Philip sat at the head of the table, with Astina and I on either side of him.

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We dined, engaging in light-hearted conversation.

As the meal progressed, Philip's demeanor shifted to one of seriousness.

"I'm very sorry about what happened with Harpel. I heard you were seriously injured. How are your wounds now?"

"I've recovered. It was not Harpel who hurt me, and there's no need for you, as the head of the Persia family, to apologize."

I answered with proper respect.

"Regardless, he was a part of our family, it's only right that I, as the head, offer an apology. More importantly…"

Philip cleared his throat a few times before proceeding cautiously.

"Calling me 'head of the Persia family', doesn't it create a sense of distance?"

"…Is that so?"

I was puzzled.

According to my understanding, my form of address was appropriate.

It would be correct to call him Viscount Persia if we were peers, but I am an academy student, with no rank to my name.

"So, how should I address you?"

"Uh… You could call me, 'Father'."

Astina's fist hit the table with a resonating thud at her father's words.

She shot him a fiery glare.

"Father?"

"Uh, well…"

Caught off guard by Astina's response, Philip dodged the issue and played it cool.

"Rudy Astria, don't worry about it."

"Ah, yes."

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Once we finished the meal, maids escorted me to a guest room.

After freshening up, I set about organizing the luggage I brought along.

It felt like I was really on vacation… It felt good.

There was a knock at the door.

"Rudy Astria, may I come in?"

It was Astina's voice.

"You may come in."

Astina walked in, dressed in light, comfortable clothes that one would typically wear indoors.

Her hair was let loose, which looked refreshing.

"Did you enjoy the meal?"

"I did, very much so."

"And you didn't find it uncomfortable?"

"Since the head of the family treated me comfortably, I was able to eat comfortably as well."

"I see… Um…"

She asked some unusual questions.

When those questions ended, there was a brief silence.

In the silence, Astina hesitated for a moment before opening her mouth.

"How about taking a walk together? The night air is nice."

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The garden was beautifully lit by magic tools, creating a great view under the night sky.

"The roses are breathtaking."

I said as we walked through the garden.

"Uh… Yes, they are."

I had thought Astina wanted to talk about something, since she suggested going for a walk.

But, she just walked with me, not saying anything and keeping her head down.

So, I just looked around.

The garden was pretty, filled with the gentle fragrance of roses.

It was romantic.

"Um… Rudy Astria."

Astina broke the silence tentatively.

"Did you really form a pact with Priscilla…"

At the sudden mention of Priscilla, I cocked my head.

Astina kept her gaze fixed on me as she continued.

"I heard that she's an elemental known for consuming human minds…"

A faint smile spread across my face as I responded.

"It's alright. She doesn't seem to be such a peculiar elemental, and forming a pact was the best decision I could make under the circumstances. Had it not been for the pact with Priscilla, I wouldn't have been able to protect you."

Astina's face was etched with regret.

"I'm sorry. I was just too inexperienced…"

"It's alright. Without you, Astina, things could have been much worse. And I appreciate all the effort you put in for us. So, this is nothing."

It was not just empty words; it was really nothing.

Besides her student council duties, Astina often helped us with our studies and also freely gave important information.

Compared to what Astina, what I had done didn't seem like a big deal at all.

"Thank you for your kind words."

Astina murmured before she lapsed into thoughtful silence, and then hesitantly resumed.

"Rudy Astria, about what my father mentioned earlier…"

I mulled over her words.

"Are you referring to Harpel?"

"No… no. The thing he said right after that."

If it was right after that…

"Do you mean his suggestion to call him 'Father'?"

"Yes… exactly! It's not as weird as it sounds, it's just my father getting worried as I'm growing older and so, saying such unusual comments. But it's not that I… I mean, it's like a parent's concern about their children finding a suitable partner? So, you don't have to worry too much about it."

Astina rambled on.

"I think it's natural for parents to have such worries."

I nodded to Astina's words.

On second thought, it wasn't uncommon for someone of Astina's age to be engaged.

It was even an age where marriages were not unheard of.

So it wasn't strange that Philip was worried about that.

"But, I don't plan to get married early…… Unless I find a good partner."

With that, Astina began fanning herself.

"It's a bit hot."

At that moment, a maid from a distance was seen rushing toward us.

"Miss Astina, the royal family has sent a message via magic orb…!"

The magic orb was an enchanted tool that could transmit brief messages.

It was a high-quality tool, typically reserved for extremely urgent situations.

The sudden usage of it visibly stiffened Astina's face.

“…Via a magic orb? To me?"

"It's not directly for you, Miss, but it's relevant to you…”

Astina cast a brief glance my way before questioning the maid further.

"What's the message about?"

"Well…"

The maid paused for a moment, then began.

"The first princess has reportedly run away."

"…?"

At her words, both of our eyes widened.

Rie ran away?

"Well… she suddenly said she was going to the Persia territory and left the royal palace."

"…It's not really running away if she mentioned her destination. But why is she coming here…"

"I'm not sure about the situation but the royal palace said to please take good care of her…"

"Okay, understood. Tell the servants to prepare a room and a good meal for the princess."

"Understood."

Astina blankly watched the back of the maid before frowning.

"A troublemaker is on the way."

"Huh?"

"It's nothing! Let's just continue our walk."

Astina said with a bright smile.

CHAPTER 52
SUMMER VACATION (4)

Morning came.

"Welcome, Princess Rie."

As expected, Rie had made her way to the Persia territory.

Philip greeted her with respect.

Seeing Philip greet her formally felt odd, given that we students usually interacted with her casually.

"Thank you for the warm welcome."

"Always. The Persia territory is open to you anytime. Feel free to visit."

After a brief exchange with Philip, she approached Astina and me.

"Rudy, it's been some time."

"Why are you here?"

At my question, Rie just shrugged as though it wasn't a big deal.

"Friendship? Promoting good relations with the Persia family? Isn't it a good time now that you're here?"

Rie seemed particularly happy about something.

Was this why she'd asked when I was visiting the Persia family in our letters?

She had been constantly asking about it in our letters.

But what about the 'running away' part…?

Astina, who was next to me, eyed Rie skeptically.

"Hmm……"

In response, Rie gave a sly smile.

"I'm hungry?"

"Ah… Okay, got it. Let's eat, Princess?"

Looking slightly irritated, Astina led Rie into the mansion.

-

Rie joined us at the dining table.

Unlike the previous day, though, hardly anyone spoke.

The only noise was the clatter of silverware.

Philip broke the silence during the meal.

"Do you have any plans after we finish eating, Princess?"

As I munched on my salad, I thought about his question.

She was here to hang out, what plans could she have?

"I think I'll tour the territory. I heard it's been a while since the Persia territory was last inspected."

Rie answered Philip, a smile creeping onto her face.

It was surprising to learn that she had an actual purpose.

I had assumed she was here just to hang out…

"Hmm… If you're going around the territory, I can arrange for our knights to accompany you."

"No need. I'll take him."

With a wide grin, Rie pointed at me.

"Me?"

I stared at Rie, bewildered.

"Yes, you. Join me later. Wear something comfortable."

"Um… Princess?"

Philip interjected cautiously.

"Rudy Astria is our guest, and he might not know our territory well. I think it would be better if Astina went with you instead."

Wow!

Philip's words moved me.

I came here to unwind.

Running errands for Rie would be annoying.

"Hmm… Then, let's switch things up. Let's just go out and have fun."

Rie looked at me and announced.

Her face said, 'you can do at least this much, right?' making it difficult for me to say no.

"Okay. Let's explore a bit after we eat."

"Wonderful~."

Rie's grin stretched from ear to ear, clearly delighted.

Philip watched the scene unfold, his chin resting thoughtfully in his hand.

"Daughter…”

"Yes?"

Astina responded to Philip's call.

With a grave tone, Philip spoke to Astina.

"Try harder."

"……”

-

With a small bag in tow, I stepped out, draped in a dark-colored robe to help obscure my face.

"Hey! Check out my wares!"

"The fruits are fresh today~!"

"Wow."

I marveled at the cityscape.

The Persia territory was a lively trade city.

Large wagons rolled by, and the air was filled with lively bargaining in the shops.

The city's vibrancy was a stark contrast to the usual quiet of the academy.

It was like stepping into a fantasy world.

"Why do you look like you've never seen a city before?"

Rie teased.

But her face was lit up with joy too.

"Rudy, let's try that."

"Sounds good."

Like excited kids, Rie and I sprinted towards a stall selling skewers.

"Don't run…”

Astina sighed, trailing behind us like a dutiful guardian.

"Rie! Look at that!"

"Oh… That's interesting…”

Today, I was brimming with excitement, exploring here and there with Rie.

It felt like being a child again.

Kind of like going to an amusement park when I was little?

Also, knowing that Astina was watching our backs made me feel even more at ease.

So, Rie and I spent the day exploring and playing freely.

"Ah…”

In the middle of all the fun, a thought crossed my mind.

I had promised Luna a gift.

I had intended to buy something nice when I got back to the academy, but since I was in the city, I decided to buy it now.

I initially considered a simple gift, but the fun I was having made me feel a little guilty.

While I was out having fun, Luna would be studying at the academy.

I would have invited Luna if I knew it would be this fun.

"Rie, let's go over there."

"Where?"

I gestured towards a magic tool shop.

Ding-a-ling.

"Welcome."

We entered the magic tool shop.

The shop was packed with different tools.

Not only magic tools, but also alchemical supplies and various other items.

"Are you looking for something specific?"

Rie asked as she browsed through the shop.

"I want to buy a gift for Luna."

"A gift?"

Rie looked puzzled at my words.

"She's stuck at the academy all the time. Isn't that a bit sad?"

"Hmm… I see."

After saying that, I started exploring the magic tool shop.

To be honest, the quality of the items seemed a bit low.

The magic tools at the academy were clearly of higher quality.

It wasn't even worth comparing.

I glanced at the ring on my right index finger.

The ring Luna had given me for my birthday.

Too many items here paled in comparison to this ring.

I wonder if it's acceptable to sell items inferior to magic tools crafted by students.

"Oh……”

One specific item caught my eye.

It was a wizard's robe that took up a significant portion of the shop.

The robe looked ordinary, but its conspicuous placement with no items surrounding it sparked my interest.

"Does this item possess special properties?"

"Oh, are you interested in that robe?"

The shopkeeper hurried over, rubbing his hands together.

"This piece is the pride of our store."

"Huh?"

"It's a robe made from wyvern skin. The skin is impressively durable, magic-resistant, and can withstand sword strikes."

I examined the robe.

The design wasn't particularly intricate, but it looked functional for combat.

"I'll take this."

My declaration took the shopkeeper by surprise.

"Well… it's quite expensive…”

"Oh, I didn't ask about the price. How much is it?"

He hesitated before revealing,

"Well… it's 10 gold."

10 gold?

I didn't know prices well enough to know how much that was, but it was an amount of money I could easily afford.

"Okay, I'll take it."

"Ar-are you sure?"

"Yes, please wrap it neatly."

"Th-thank you!"

The shopkeeper grabbed the robe and scurried to the back of the store to wrap it.

As the day wore on, the city began to quiet.

Shops began closing, and the traffic of carriages dwindled.

"Hmm……"

Rie looked at the sky, scanning the area.

Seeing her, I proposed,

"Hey, let's head back."

"No, wait a bit."

Astina and I exchanged confused glances as Rie continued to scan the area.

What was she waiting for?

My stomach rumbled, signaling that it was time for dinner.

After a while, my curiosity got the better of me.

"Hey, what are you waiting for?"

Rie looked at me, her head tilted to one side.

"That's strange."

"What's strange?"

"When are they going to launch the fireworks?"

She asked innocently.

“……Fireworks?"

"Yes. Shouldn't it be time for them?"

I stared at her, surprised.

"That's odd……”

Rie looked at the sky, her brow furrowed in confusion.

I quietly moved closer to Astina.

In a whisper, I asked her.

"Is today a special occasion?"

"No, it's just a regular weekday."

"Then why does Rie expect fireworks?"

"I have no clue."

I stroked my chin, deep in thought.

Could Rie possibly believe there was a festival today?

Given the city's bustling atmosphere, it seemed reasonable.

After all, we had spent the day as if we were attending a festival.

Could this be a case of blissful ignorance?

"Hmm……”

I could tell Rie that today was not a festival day and that there would be no fireworks.

However, it felt like doing so would shatter her childlike anticipation.

It was like telling a child who stays up all night on Christmas that Santa isn't real.

"Could we possibly arrange for fireworks at this hour?"

"That's absurd. It's impossible with gunpowder, and equally impossible with magic."

Astina stated firmly.

"Impossible with magic?"

"Yes, orchestrating a fireworks display isn't doable with just one or two magic scrolls. If you try with such limited resources, the outcome would be more pitiful than impressive."

I glanced at Rie, whose hopeful eyes were fixed on the sky.

"But shouldn't we strive to preserve innocence?"

"Huh?"

"Please obtain one or two of those scrolls for me."

I opened the small bag I had with me.

Inside was Luna's spellbook.

I was hesitant to leave it at the academy, and equally hesitant to give it to Luna.

While it would be safe at the academy, I felt uncomfortable leaving it unattended.

And giving it to Luna was complicated because of the promise I had made with her.

Luna had asked me to give it to her only when she was ready.

"Please etch the magic circle on this page. I'll take care of the rest."

Gradually, a look of disappointment began to surface on Rie's face.

Rie was no fool, she was bound to realize something was wrong.

"Hey, let's head back."

"Why? Isn't this what you wanted to see?"

I smirked, holding Luna's spellbook in my hands, channeling mana into it.

My mana was absorbed into the spellbook, and a magic circle materialized in mid-air.

And……

-Whooosh!

-Bang!

Fireworks burst from the magic circle, soaring into the sky, exploding into a vibrant kaleidoscope of colors.

"Huh?"

"We're just getting started, sit back."

I channeled a considerable amount of mana into the spellbook, generating dozens of magic circles in the air, firing a multitude of fireworks into the night sky.

"Ugh……"

It drained a lot of my mana.

Making me cough in pain.

However, as I watched the sky, the pain seemed to dissipate.

Compared to a grand fireworks display, it was modest, yet captivating.

As though dozens of flowers were blossoming against the vast, inky canvas of the sky.

The floral blossoms were sparse, insufficient to fill the canvas, but enough to create a sense of ethereal beauty.

"Wow……”

Rie gasped in awe, her eye fixated on the sky.

"This is… what you wanted to see, right?"

As I said with a smile, Rie looked at me, her face a mix of surprise and wonder.

"You… did this?"

I didn't answer, only returned her surprise with a smile.

“……Thank you."

Rie, her face aglow with sheer joy, thanked me with heartfelt sincerity.

CHAPTER 53
SUMMER VACATION (5)

Academy training ground.

"What just happened…" Evan sat alone, deep in thought.

The moment when Rudy Astria punched the scarecrow to pieces.

How did a wizard break a scarecrow with just a fist?

Evan couldn't make sense of it.

No matter how many times he swung his sword at it or launched spells, the scarecrow remained unscathed.

But Rudy Astria had shattered it with a single punch.

"Could I survive that punch?"

Shaking his head, Evan knew he couldn't.

Not that he'd willingly receive such a blow, but it was overwhelming even with his defensive skills.

"Rudy Astria…"

Evan mumbled to himself.

He was indeed the top student.

That was confirmed as the first term concluded.

And Rudy Astria was second.

Yet, why did he feel like he couldn't win in a fight against Rudy Astria?

What Evan saw was merely Rudy breaking a scarecrow.

He had only witnessed that one act, but it felt like Rudy was already one step ahead.

Of course, Evan was learning not only magic but swordsmanship as well.

But, even when combining both fields, he felt he was trailing Rudy Astria.

Rudy was moving too fast.

Too fast for him to keep up.

"I can't… let this go on."

Evan clenched his fist.

Being first in academics wasn't everything.

He was ahead in grades but lagging in other areas.

If he only focused on academics, he'd lose to Rudy overall.

Evan began to train harder than ever.

To truly surpass Rudy Astria.

-

The following day.

Morning arrived in the Persia territory.

Rie, Astina, and I were enjoying breakfast at a restaurant.

"You're leaving today?"

At my announcement, Rie wore a puzzled expression.

"I need to get back. I was only planning to meet the Head of the Persia family and then leave."

"Why not stay and enjoy yourself a bit more?"

"Is this your place?"

Astina responded to Rie with a surprised look.

Rie shrugged off Astina's remark confidently.

"After all, we're all subjects of the Royal Family, so I have the right to speak my mind."

"Even so, I'm returning to the Academy today. I've packed my things, and a carriage is already waiting."

At this, Rie fell silent, thinking.

Then, she flashed a playful smile.

"Then, should I head to the Academy too?"

"The carriage is…"

"I can share it with you."

"It might be a tight fit. It only seats one."

"Then I'll sit a bit closer. It's fine. A little close contact is inevitable…"

As we carried on our conversation, a servant entered the room and whispered something to Astina.

Then, Astina glanced at Rie and smiled.

"It seems you don't have to worry about that."

Rie tilted her head, not understanding.

"What do you mean?"

"If you've left home without permission, you should return."

“……What?"

Rie's expression tensed at those words.

As Rie's face grew stern, a knight in golden armor entered the dining room.

The golden armor symbolized the Royal Knights.

Two more knights trailed behind him.

Rie's eyes widened at the sight.

"Why are you here?"

"We're here to bring the princess back. We have orders from His Majesty the Emperor to retrieve the princess who left without permission."

"I didn't run away! I let everyone know where I was going!"

Despite Rie's protest, the knights grabbed her arm without hesitation.

Their practiced ease suggested this wasn't their first time handling such a situation.

"You… Astina…! You betrayer!!"

"I can't ignore the Royal Knights, can I? After all, I'm a subject of the Royal Family too."

Astina shrugged off Rie's outburst with a smug grin.

"I, I want to go to the Academy!!!!"

"That's not an option. You need to return to the Palace."

"No! Noooooo!!!"

Rie was hauled off by the Royal Knights.

Is it really okay to treat royalty this way…

Wouldn't they face consequences later?

Well, if it's the Emperor's order, I guess it's not a problem.

I watched as Rie was led away.

Then the first knight turned to Astina, giving his respects.

"Thank you for your help."

"When the Royal Knights ask, I'm obliged to assist."

Astina responded to the knight with a bright smile.

That look felt odd.

Usually, she wore a forced smile in such situations, but today it was genuinely happy.

Was she happy about Rie being taken away……

"Well, till we meet again."

The Royal Knights saluted Astina, and they took Rie away.

The room felt empty, like a storm had just passed through.

"So, Rudy Astria. Are you returning to the Academy?"

"Yes. There's nothing else for me here."

"Alright, then I will see you off."

With that, I climbed into the carriage with Astina's farewell.

-

Professor McGuire's Laboratory.

"Strengthen the control field further… maybe etch a reinforcement rune here?"

"Hmm… that might work. Then focus on the control rune over here and calculate."

"Yes! Understood."

Professor McGuire was guiding Luna in magic circles.

'The more I see, the more amazed I am… '

Professor McGuire had mentored many students and disciples.

Among them, some were hailed as geniuses, and some wizards made their mark in research.

However, Luna was unlike any student he had encountered before.

She possessed an intellect and aptitude uniquely suited for magical circles.

While theoretical knowledge was important in magic circle creation, one particular aspect was crucial.

That was mathematical ability.

Luna's aptitude for mathematics was beyond that of an average person.

She calculated control equations in her mind and can quickly compute the various probabilities.

Possessing superior problem-solving abilities, she factored in all exceptions when crafting a magic circle.

These skills marked Luna as a wizard completely optimized for magic circles.

Magic circles constructed by Luna were of unprecedented mana efficiency.

However, as a young student, she occasionally made errors due to a lack of fundamental understanding on magical theory.

They were basics that anyone could master with time.

Professor McGuire couldn't afford to let such a student slip through his fingers.

So, he put his plan into action.

"Luna, is there anything you'd like to eat?"

"Huh? No… I just had lunch…”

"Luna, do you enjoy chocolate?"

"I do like it… but I just brushed my teeth…”

"Luna, would you like a cup of tea?"

"I'm fine…”

However, Luna's unwavering focus tested Professor McGuire's patience daily.

There was a single motive behind McGuire's persistent offerings.

He wished to secure Luna as his laboratory assistant.

Though still a student, if the professor had the authority, he could appoint her as his assistant.

While her role would be as an assistant, she was still a student, so he couldn't delegate her academy-related tasks.

It was purely a position to aid with research.

Of course, Luna would undoubtedly be invaluable in research assistance, but enlisting her as an assistant now bore another implication.

It was about securing her in advance.

Once a year passed, then two, it would become evident that by the time Luna graduates from the academy, she would be extraordinary.

At that point, all professors would vie for Luna.

That's why he wanted to take her as an assistant now.

Designating Luna as his assistant at present wasn't about tasking her with responsibilities from this point forward, but about working with her even after graduation.

The aim was to secure her early, preventing other professors from poaching her later.

"Huu…"

Then, a nearby assistant approached Professor McGuire and asked.

"Professor, no luck today either…?"

"Nothing today."

At Professor McGuire's words, the assistants too felt a sense of disappointment.

"Haah…"

"Sigh…"

When an exceptional individual joined the lab, it wasn't just the professor who felt it.

The research assistants in the same lab did as well.

So, all members of McGuire's lab were united by a single concern.

How could they entice Luna to join their lab…?

What in the world was Luna partial to…?

How could they convince Luna to accept the role of an assistant…?

The individuals in Professor McGuire's lab were consumed by these worries once again today.

While the lab members were focused on their predicament, Luna too had her own concern.

'Rudy's back today… should I invite him for a delicious dinner?'

Luna was drawing a magic circle with such a concern in mind.

CHAPTER 54
SUMMER VACATION (6)

Academy conference room.

Most professors gathered around a central table, with Dean Oliver at the head.

Oliver, wearing round glasses and a smart outfit, took the lead, a rare sight.

Headmaster McDowell's absence didn't surprise anyone.

Usually, McDowell ran these meetings.

However, he often got busy during holidays, leaving Oliver in charge.

"Did everyone enjoy the break?"

Oliver asked his colleagues, flashing a polite smile.

The break hadn't ended yet, his question was merely a formality.

The purpose of this gathering was to finalize the academic calendar for the upcoming semester.

While they typically followed a standard schedule, they adjusted dates for exams and other events to suit various factors.

This time, due to numerous happenings from the first term, the agenda was packed, prompting serious looks from the professors.

"Let's start," Oliver announced, initiating the session.

"The first item up for discussion is limiting first-year students' outside activities due to the unfortunate incident during the midterm camp."

At this, Professor Cromwell raised his hand.

"Please, Professor Cromwell, go ahead."

"I don't see the need for such restrictions. The incident wasn't a result of first-year students' actions."

Following Cromwell's statement, Professor McGuire also lifted his hand.

"I agree. The occurrence was due to our oversight as professors. We need to pay more attention, instead of limiting the students, which seems somewhat unfair."

With both of them speaking up, no one objected.

No one wanted to argue with Professors McGuire and Cromwell.

These two had significant sway within the academy due to their consistent research contributions, admirable character, and ethical conduct.

Additionally, Cromwell hailed from a renowned family and was often seen as a potential future dean.

However, his passion for teaching and studying magic was greater than his desire for the position.

"Does anyone object to continuing with the first-year schedule as planned?"

Even as Oliver asked once more, the professors stayed silent.

"Then we'll follow Professors Cromwell and McGuire's suggestion. We'll proceed with the joint practical of the 1st and 2nd years, along with the rest of the schedule, as usual. The next item up for discussion is……"

With that, the meeting moved forward under Oliver's guidance.

Once all topics were addressed, Oliver left the academy grounds.

Hidden beneath a hooded cloak, Oliver stepped beyond the academy walls.

He scanned his surroundings, then navigated towards a dimly lit alleyway.

Tucked in the alley was a small, unassuming shop.

Inside, there were no customers, just a single bartender cleaning a glass.

"You're here."

The bartender seemed to be expecting Oliver.

"How is Count Fred faring these days?"

Oliver settled into a seat, pulling back his hood.

Count Fred's family owned a respectable territory near the capital and held a reputation for their work with magical tools.

They were notable backers of Princess Yuni, the second princess.

Although traditionally seen as rivals to Garwell's Handrei family, they'd recently gained more power due to the Handrei's downfall.

"The count is as well as ever. But…"

"But?"

A strained smile appeared on the bartender's face.

"Princess Rie's investigations have been rather bothersome."

"Princess Rie… She's been staying out of the spotlight, hasn't she?"

"Not recently, no, but she's been investigating into past affairs."

"Past affairs?"

The bartender set down the glass he was cleaning, and, leaning closer, whispered to Oliver.

"It's about Professor Levian."

Oliver's brow furrowed at this.

"Why would the princess suddenly become interested in Levian?"

"We're not sure. We've done our best to hide any damning evidence, but considering it involves Levian, there might be undiscovered traces. We're just staying cautious for now."

"Sounds troublesome."

Upon hearing the bartender's tale, Oliver let out a sigh of annoyance.

"But enough about that, how did the meeting pan out?"

The bartender handed Oliver a piece of paper while posing the question.

Taking the paper and a nearby pen, Oliver started to write a letter.

"It was smooth sailing. Professors Cromwell and McGuire suggested we stick to the original schedule."

"That's certainly good news."

The bartender chuckled at Oliver's words.

After Oliver finished his letter, he passed it back to the bartender and rose from his seat, adjusting his robe.

"Leaving so soon?"

"I should get going. Lingering here won't do me any good."

As Oliver prepared to depart, the bartender spoke up.

"Oh, one more thing, Count Fred told his child to keep a close eye on Princess Rie. Apparently, he's shared some information concerning Professor Levian."

Oliver's brow creased again at the bartender's words.

"Anton? I can't see how that would help."

Anton, a second-year student at the academy, was Count Fred's eldest son and a magic department student.

While his grades and magic skills were good, he wasn't extraordinary.

"Count Fred seems to want Anton to acquire some experience……"

"Doesn't look like any grand plan is at play, so it should be harmless."

With a casual shrug, Oliver brushed off his initial worry.

Even if Anton knew the details concerning Levian, unless he completely lost his mind, he wouldn't reveal such information.

Doing so would inevitably spell disaster for the Fred family.

"I'll be heading out now."

With that, Oliver strode towards the shop's exit.

-

"Astina, how could you!"

Rie's outcry made it sound like she had been personally wronged.

"And what, I should've been at odds with the Royal Knights for you…? I just came to play for a while. I just had fun and left, that's all."

Astina snorted as if it were natural, scoffing at Rie's outrage.

On the other hand, Luna murmured, her expression sinking.

"I couldn't even go… it sounds like you all had such a good time…"

"Ah."

Astina and Rie were flustered at the sight and began to comfort her.

As the holiday slowly came to an end, the academy's inhabitants started to trickle back in.

Both Rie and Astina had returned, their chit-chat echoing through the corridors.

"Sorry, Luna. I didn't know Rie was planning on going… If I'd known, I would've invited you."

"No, no, Rudy, it's not your fault! You even brought back a gift."

We continued our casual conversation as we strolled through the academy grounds.

"I need to move out first."

"Alright, see you tomorrow then!"

I waved them goodbye and headed towards the dormitory.

Having transitioned from Top Seat to Second Seat, I had to relocate my belongings to the Second Seat's designated room.

I had spent the holidays focused on studying black magic and mana manipulation, improving my proficiency in the latter.

Whether it was fortifying my arm or specific body parts, it was no longer a challenge.

But the rewards of mana manipulation extended beyond physical enhancements.

My control and usage of black magic had significantly stabilized as well.

Much like my own progress, my friends too seemed to have improved greatly.

While Rie and Astina's progress was less clear, Luna's had grown tremendously.

Each time she showcased her research findings, the complexity of her magic circles amplified, making them increasingly difficult to understand.

My struggle to keep pace hinted at Luna's rapidly accelerating growth.

Sure, I hadn't dedicated much time to studying magic circles, but that didn't mean I'd completely ignored magic theory.

Despite my skills in creating magic circles lagging behind, I was quite good at understanding their type and function.

However, lately, deciphering Luna's magic circles had become a very difficult task.

While Luna's rapid development was amazing, it also sparked a worry that I might struggle to keep up with her.

Aside from Luna, another individual had exhibited noticeable growth - Evan.

We'd incidentally bumped into each other at the training grounds, and it was clear that he had evolved since our initial encounter.

His magic had gotten stronger, and his swordsmanship had become very stable.

"Well… school is about to start."

Seeing these developments made me happy, but I was worried about the events coming up.

After school starts, there were two immediate events.

An individual skills assessment and a joint practical for the first and second-year students.

The individual skills assessment was an examination designed to assess each student's progress during the holidays.

Given our varying abilities, we would be subjected to numerous types of assessments.

Among these, the power assessment was the most highly anticipated event.

As implied by its name, this was an assessment designed to measure the level of power one could harness with one special blow.

Though it was challenging to assess an individual's abilities solely based on this aspect, the spectacle of executing such a powerful move made it the most dramatic of all evaluations.

It received the undivided attention of both professors and students.

Although I hadn't developed a special move specifically for this assessment, the

thought was still bouncing around in my mind.

The outcomes of this evaluation significantly influenced our grades, so it was better to get a good score.

What I was most interested in about this assessment was who would outshine the rest among the first-year students.

Astina was expected to comfortably clinch the top spot among the second years, but no clear front-runner emerged from the first-years, especially since the winner in the original is currently absent.

Originally, the top scorer was Serina.

However, in Serina's absence, it wouldn't be surprising if the likes of Rie, Luna, or Evan emerged victorious.

More important than this assessment was the joint practical for the first and second-year students.

I'd had several discussions with Professor Cromwell regarding this.

As a result, I was able to persuade him to carry out the event properly.

While I knew that Dean Oliver would have managed things even if I hadn't intervened, I took the initiative, in fear of more changes to the story.

"But it seems to have proceeded without a hitch."

I smiled and moved my things.

And so, as the holidays drew to a close, a new semester was about to start.

CHAPTER 55
INDIVIDUAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT (1)

"Is this a lab or a tea house? Why is everyone lounging around?"

Professor Cromwell scowled, his glasses perched on his nose.

His desk was a mountain of paperwork, and the dark circles under Cromwell's eyes extended down to his chin.

"I didn't expect there to still be so much paperwork with the semester starting tomorrow."

McGuire and Robert sat at a guest table, sipping tea and chatting.

Robert, a dark magic professor without much administrative responsibility, had less paperwork, while McGuire, with more assistants, had already delegated his work.

"Did you prepare for the individual skills assessment next week?"

"I have, but organizing the joint practical for first and second-year students is a nightmare."

In response to McGuire's question, Cromwell took off his glasses and spoke.

McGuire nodded at Cromwell's words and responded.

"It's a bit rushed this time."

"But we've laid the groundwork, so there shouldn't be any major problems."

Robert, listening to their conversation, scowled and shook his head.

"Just do it as usual, why complicate things?"

"We have an unusually talented batch of first-year students, and given the recent

incident, we need to be cautious."

Professor McGuire shifted the topic after hearing Robert and Cromwell's conversation.

"Speaking of which, isn't the individual assessment interesting?"

"What's there to expect? It's just some kids scribbling magic circles."

At Professor Robert's remark, McGuire laughed.

"Just wait and see. Let's see who takes the first place."

"Remember, scrolls aren't allowed in individual assessments. And for magic tools, students can only use those they've crafted themselves."

"Cromwell recommended a student this time, Luna Railer. She's impressive, isn't she? Even without a scroll, she's bound to rank high. Second-year top spot is probably Astina's, but the first year's a mystery."

Then Robert smirked.

"Astina is the second-year top spot?"

"So, you're saying there's another contender?"

At that, Cromwell reacted.

"Astina may be an all-rounder in academics and combat, but the individual assessment is a little different, isn't it?"

Robert spoke with a confident smirk.

However, his point was valid.

Individual assessments weren't about judging combat skills or academic performance, but about measuring a person's power when they exert their utmost strength.

Even if someone excels in academics, combat skills, or intuition, without that one

decisive move, they would not score high.

"The ones under me might be novices, but this assessment might be different?"

"You mean that Borval guy you've been mentoring lately?"

"Well, there's Borval and Rudy Astria."

Cromwell chuckled at Robert's comment.

Robert, who'd never taken on a disciple before, seemed to have changed his tune.

He didn't directly say 'disciples,' but he was virtually nurturing them, which was no different.

Considering 'that incident' Robert had gone through, this was substantial progress.

"Well, let's say the second year is like that, but the first years are the most eye-catching."

At Cromwell's words, both McGuire and Robert nodded in agreement.

"This time, we've got Luna Railer, nurtured by McGuire, top student Evan, Princess Rie von Ristonia, and Rudy Astria. Each one a contender."

-Bang!

Just as Cromwell finished his sentence, the lab door flew open.

A muscular man stood in the doorway.

It was Jackson Pumpkin, a swordsmanship professor.

"Heh heh… You lot seem to be having quite the chat!"

As he sauntered in, the three Magic Department professors scowled.

They'd been finding Jackson increasingly irksome lately.

Ever since the final exam, he'd been continually bringing up Yeniel, which was

getting annoying.

"You might not know! We can't forget our Yeniel and Locke!"

"We're talking about the Magic Department. Why are their names coming up?"

"Well, we all do the assessment together, don't we!"

"So you're saying your students might take the top spot?"

"Of course! Maybe not the second years, but the first years are exceptional!"

Robert smirked, as if he'd caught Jackson in a trap.

"How about a wager then? Among the professors here."

"A bet?"

McGuire looked puzzled at Robert's proposal.

"We'll predict the first-year top spot."

"Alright! What's the wager?"

At Jackson's question, Cromwell grinned and produced a piece of paper.

Written on the paper was a new system.

"What's this?"

"It's a weekend duty system starting next week."

"I heard about this. Due to recent complaints about public order, it's a system where a professor is on standby in the academy until 10 PM on weekends."

McGuire added more detail to Cromwell's explanation.

"What a strange and annoying thing that has come up."

"So that's what we're going to do."

As Robert scowled and spoke, Cromwell elaborated.

"How about the rest of us cover the duty of the person who predicts right?"

"Oh."

"That sounds good!"

When Professor Cromwell spoke, the other three professors also reacted positively.

Then, Professor McGuire was the first to chime in, tapping the desk for emphasis.

"I'm going with Luna Railer."

"I'll go with Rudy Astria."

Robert, ever so casual, crossed his legs and stated his choice. All eyes then turned to Jackson.

Jackson had a daily routine of singing Yeniel's praises, but in a individual evaluation that hinged on a single powerful move, Yeniel was at a disadvantage.

After all, Yeniel was a female swordswoman who favored the rapier.

"Hmm…"

"Make up your mind, Jackson."

Jackson's eyes then lit up as if he'd reached a decision.

"I'll pick Locke Lucarion."

"Really? You spend all day boasting about Yeniel, yet you pick a different kid?"

"Given the circumstances and the wager, I've made the most logical choice."

"Alright, Cromwell, who's your pick? You can't choose Rudy Astria; that's a duplicate."

Robert turned his gaze to Cromwell, the last to decide, and laid down the rule.

"Don't fret."

Without a moment's hesitation, Cromwell voiced his choice.

"Evan. My pick is Evan from the Department of Magic."

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As I stepped out into the morning, I was greeted by a refreshing breeze.

The scorching summer had passed, and the cool embrace of autumn was settling in.

The sky was a clear blue, typical of autumn, and dotted with fluffy clouds.

While I admired the sky, a vibrant voice greeted me.

"Rudy! Good morning!"

"Oh, Luna."

I returned Luna's greeting with a wave.

Despite it being the first day of school, with students around us looking worn out, Luna was radiant.

I didn't feel particularly drained either.

Luna and I had maintained our routines even during the holidays, so the start of the semester didn't feel like an abrupt change, more like a continuation of our usual routines.

"Rudy, what's your first class today?"

"It's Professor Cromwell's magic practice."

"Really? I have a general subject class on the first floor, so let's meet up in front of the dining hall afterward!"

"Sure, see you later."

Having made lunch plans with Luna, I made my way to class.

All things considered, the transition from the first to the second semester was seamless.

Life at the academy seemed to be progressing peacefully.

However, that illusion was quickly dispelled.

Upon entering the classroom, I found two students already present: Rie and Evan.

Momentarily startled by Evan's unexpected appearance, I almost retreated, thinking I'd entered the wrong room.

But seeing Rie's familiar, scowling face, I sighed and stepped inside.

As soon as I entered, Evan turned to me.

"Hello, Rudy Astria."

His sudden greeting caught me off guard.

While Evan and I had shared the same training ground on multiple occasions, we hadn't even exchanged glances, let alone a greeting.

Why this sudden change?

Without warning, Evan rose from his seat and extended his hand towards me.

"I look forward to working with you this semester."

This was… unexpected.

I frowned at Evan's sudden move.

It was a behavior I would normally pass by in the game, but it was confusing when it actually happened in front of me.

Casting a confused glance at Rie, I found her equally baffled, shrugging in response to my unspoken question.

Not wanting to leave Evan hanging, I offered a forced smile and shook his hand.

"Well, let's get along."

Still shaking Evan's hand, I took my seat.

I had a rough conversation with Rie through eye contact, but honestly, I didn't know what Rie wanted to say, so I just brushed it off.

If it's an important matter, we'll talk later.

Moments later, Professor Cromwell entered the classroom.

Upon noticing Evan, the professor spoke up.

"Did everyone greet each other? Meet Evan, who will be in class with us starting this semester. I won't say get along well, just don't fight."

Professor Cromwell then brandished a piece of paper.

"There's an individual assessment next week. I presume you're all aware of it?"

As he spoke, his gaze drifted across the classroom, finally resting on me.

"Rudy Astria."

“……Yes?"

"An assessment is just an assessment. The result of the assessment is not that important."

Did this man eat something wrong in the morning?

What had happened to the professor who had chastised us for poor results?

Noticing my furrowed brow, Professor Cromwell seemed to understand my confusion and nodded in acknowledgment.

"I mentioned before that your grades were not great. But what I want to say is that you don't necessarily need to pour all your energy into such a trivial assessment. Just

use enough force so it won't greatly affect your grades."

I was a bit convinced upon hearing his words.

After all, I hadn't planned on pouring all of my energy into this assessment in the first place.

As long as I maintained a reasonable ranking, my grades would not suffer.

"I see your point… I understand."

"Good, take it easy."

"Understood."

Although I felt that there was an ulterior motive, I couldn't really understand it so I just let it slide.

CHAPTER 56
INDIVIDUAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT (2)

Individual Skill Assessment.

Given to first and second-year students.

This test, more like a health check-up than an exam, gauged individual capabilities.

"Next student, please step forward."

At that invitation, I walked into a room where a small glass bead and a woman awaited.

"This is the mana measurement room. Rest your hand on the glass bead and take some deep breaths."

As I followed her instruction, placing my hand on the bead, a light bloomed from within.

The brightness was gentle, not enough to blind, but it snuck through the crevices between my fingers.

"Alright, you're done. Please proceed to the next station."

Once finished, I exited the room, joining several other ongoing tests.

Wizards were primarily assessed for mana, but there were also evaluations for physical strength and endurance.

Unique screenings were conducted by the Alchemy and Elemental Departments.

The last test was the maximum output test, giving this series of tests its "assessment" label.

It measures the maximum amount of power one can exert.

This power is precisely quantified and it's this grading that gives the evaluation its name.

Yet, despite the precision of the measurements, it was a stretch to label the evaluation entirely objective.

Everyone had their unique style of fighting—some packed a powerful punch with each strike, while others preferred a barrage of weaker attacks.

The purpose of this assessment was to highlight these individual capabilities ahead of the joint practical for first and second-year students.

Mixed teams of first and second-year students would face off against one another.

So, the assessment was an opportunity to impress and secure a good team.

But the scores from this assessment also factored into our overall grades, so the aim was to balance showcasing skills with securing a respectable score.

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I waited for my turn at the maximum output test, proceeding through the preliminary tests one at a time.

The maximum output test took place at the center, under supervision, and was not bound by the order of the other exams.

If you were summoned in the midst of another test, you had to report to the center immediately.

While I waited, a familiar name echoed through the room.

"Student number 73, Rie Von Ristonia, please report to the center."

The announcement, amplified by magic, sounded throughout the space.

"Hey, it's the princess's turn. Should we go watch?"

With Rie's name called, whispers stirred among the students.

As the murmurs grew, everyone broke away from the line, converging toward the center.

Joining the flow of students, I headed toward the center, curious about Rie's progress.

Over the vacation, I'd only seen her once.

"Rie Von Ristonia, signal when you're ready."

When I reached the center, an open field stretched out before me. There stood a scarecrow, with Rie its only company.

Professors and students watched from a safe distance.

Rie drew in a deep breath, standing before her straw opponent.

This scarecrow was a bit different from those at the training grounds, mainly due to its angry expression.

I suspect it was fortified with various spells for this test.

"Sylph," Rie's voice echoed in the open field.

Suddenly, a hawk-shaped wind elemental, Sylph, materialized behind her.

Whispers of awe rose from the crowd.

A 1st-year magic department student using an intermediate elemental was a sight to behold.

However, instead of admiration, worry gnawed at me.

Rie, although having a promising future with Sylph, was still in the Magic department.

Would she have had enough time to refine her magic while also training with elementals during the break?

Rie was well aware of the limits of her elemental talents.

That was why she had joined the Magic department in the first place.

However, putting too much focus on elementals might hinder the growth of her magic later on.

My gaze rested on Rie, filled with concern.

Seemingly tense, Rie took a few calming breaths before staring intently at the scarecrow and extending her hand.

Mana surged from her palm.

It looked she was going to use magic.

Was she planning to use both elementals and magic simultaneously?

As the question flitted through my mind, a small flame ignited from Rie's hand.

At first glance, it seemed like a basic Ignition spell, the most elementary of fire-attribute magic.

But everyone present knew better.

It wasn't a basic spell.

It was Explosion magic, the evolved intermediate version of fire-attribute magic.

This was Rie's signature spell, known more for the shock it delivered rather than burns.

When the spell sparked into existence, a wave of anticipation washed over me.

Rie's leap in progress, summoning an intermediate elemental while simultaneously reaching the intermediate magic level, was a testament to her tremendous effort.

Yet, her shaky mana control betrayed her limited proficiency with intermediate magic.

Raising the small flame, she declared, "I accept the challenge."

-We now begin the evaluation of Rie Von Ristonia.

The wizards present readied their staves, preparing to shield from any debris caused by the explosion.

"Sylph."

At Rie's call, Sylph stirred, gathering wind.

A vortex formed, swirling toward the elemental's beak.

Rie raised the explosion spell to Sylph's beak.

Carefully positioning it, she waited until the wind swirled around the magic, the activity eventually ceasing.

In the ensuing silence, she uttered a single word: "Fire."

With a loud bang, Sylph unleashed the explosion magic, resembling a gunshot.

Like a bullet, the magic raced towards the scarecrow.

An instant before impact, it detonated.

A thunderous roar echoed across the field as the minuscule flame transformed into a ferocious inferno.

Amplified by Sylph's wind, the explosion was far stronger than usual.

"Barrier!"

The surrounding wizards hastily erected barriers against the spreading blast.

Despite their efforts, the explosion stubbornly persisted.

As it dwindled, Rie let out a sigh of relief.

The spectators resumed their chatter.

"Remarkable for a first-year—skillful application, plus high levels in both elemental

and magic…”

"Truly a princess's performance."

The crowd buzzed with approval.

From my perspective, too, Rie's display was impressive.

Simultaneous use of an intermediate elemental and magic was uncommon, even among upperclassmen.

However, that was all it was.

Frankly, for this assessment that required a concentrated force to a single point, her widespread explosion wasn't the best choice.

"Rie Von Ristonia. With 2430 points, you are first in the first grade."

Nonetheless, her power was unrivaled amongst the candidates So far.

Naturally, Rie's first place standing was due to the absence of any strong competition so far, and the score was far from unbeatable.

Still, what she demonstrated was impressive.

"Rudy Astria."

Professor Robert's voice drew my attention.

I found him striding towards me, hands casually in his pockets.

"You can surpass that, right?"

His question left me pondering.

"I suppose I can."

But I had no intention of pushing myself to such an extent.

While my power was great when I put everything into a punch, my body wouldn't be

able to withstand it.

A body like Borval's might, but mine, yet to be fully developed, wouldn't hold up.

"Then claim first place."

"What?"

I was taken aback by his sudden instruction.

"Secure first place, then return."

Suddenly deciding that I should claim first place?

It was definitely out of the blue, but for some reason, It felt good.

Robert has never pushed me to achieve anything specific.

But his bold statement to get first and come back gave me a sense of how highly he thought of me.

"If I secure first place, does that mean I become an official disciple?" I asked playfully.

“…I'll consider it."

At that, I lifted the corners of my mouth.

I had been feeling a little competitive lately.

I will make him acknowledge me as a proper disciple.

"Understood," I nodded, grinning.

Professor Cromwell did say to take it easy, but that must've been a joke.

I doubted the professor would seriously tell me to take it easy.

The announcer's voice echoed.

-Student number 74, Luna Railer. Please proceed to the center.

Luna was up next…?

Nearby, Luna promptly moved towards the center, her expression notably more serious than usual.

Extracting a small cube from her pocket, she declared softly, "Luna Railer, I accept the challenge."

CHAPTER 57
INDIVIDUAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT (3)

A few days prior, within Mcguire's lab.

"Hmm…”

Luna studied a piece of paper in Mcguire's lab, brow furrowed in thought.

The paper bore a magic circle.

A circle she intended to use for her individual assessment.

There was a problem, though.

Scrolls weren't allowed in the assessment.

With scrolls out of the question, she had to make a magical tool using mana stones.

The amount of mana stones Luna could get, however, was limited.

Using low-quality mana stones reduced the amount of mana you could inject into the magic circle.

This meant you had to pick between using a subpar magic circle or maximizing the circle's efficiency.

Since using a low-grade circle was out of the question, the only option was to maximize efficiency.

The problem was, even the most efficient magic circle Luna could create with the available mana stones would struggle to make an impression during the assessment.

With no other alternatives, all she could do was make her magic circle as efficient as possible.

"Ugh…”

The lab assistants glanced towards Luna.

They wanted to help Luna, but how could they understand when Luna was simply staring at the paper, groaning in frustration.

"Hmm!"

Suddenly, a female assistant rose from her seat.

She slowly approached Luna.

"Um… Luna? Do you need help?"

Luna turned her head at the voice behind her.

She responded with a smile.

"Well, I'm having a bit of trouble with this magic circle…”

Hearing this, the assistant's face lit up.

"Really? Can I help you then? What's the issue?"

"No, it's fine. I appreciate your concern."

"Um… what part are you stuck on? I might be able to help…”

"No, thank you! I'll figure it out!"

With Luna's polite refusal, the female assistant, feeling defeated, returned to her seat.

Her defeat, though, signaled an opening for the other assistants.

'A problem with a magic circle?'

'It looks well-made to me, what's wrong with it?'

They all stared, unflinchingly, at the magic circle before Luna.

Yet, they couldn't pinpoint any issues.

This magic circle was near perfect, activating smoothly and demonstrating excellent efficiency.

The only issue was Luna's limited mana stone supply.

Luna groaned once more, striving to squeeze even a fraction more efficiency.

However, the magic circle, already operating at peak efficiency, offered no room for improvement.

"What's everyone doing?"

Just then, Professor Mcguire entered the lab.

He frowned at the sight of his assistants squirming in their seats, scrutinizing Luna's magic circle.

"Oh, Professor. Hello!"

Hearing Mcguire's voice, Luna jumped up from her seat and greeted him with respect.

Mcguire's face warmed into a smile at Luna's response.

It was refreshing to see such an earnest young student, a welcome change from his worn-out assistants and arrogant colleagues.

Mcguire approached Luna with a friendly tone.

"So, how's your preparation for the assessment going?"

"Ah… well…"

Luna responded with an awkward smile, lifting the paper that held the magic circle.

"So this is the magic circle for your individual assessment?"

"Yes…"

"Alright, let's have a look."

Mcguire sat down and took the paper from Luna.

He scrutinized the circle carefully.

There seemed to be no issues.

Luna had maximized the efficiency to the best of her knowledge, and the runes controlling the magic circle were well-placed.

The magic circle's harmony with the other runes was also well-done.

Luna seems to have a good grasp of the individual assessment, playing to her strengths nicely.

Mcguire looked up at Luna.

Despite presenting a well-crafted magic circle, Luna was nervously fiddling with her fingers.

'Something must be bothering her.'

His quick observation led him to this conclusion.

His instincts, sharpened over years of teaching at the academy, surpassed those of the assistants.

Mcguire paused to think.

What could be the issue?

The magic circle was fine.

The issue must be external.

Mcguire then remembered Luna's biggest problem.

Money.

He recalled that Professor Cromwell had footed the bill for Luna to attend his special lecture.

After a few sessions with Luna, recognizing her potential, he returned Cromwell's money and continued teaching her for free.

Still, Luna's financial troubles remained.

Mcguire rubbed his chin.

In this situation, he could offer her a mana stone, but he knew Luna would decline.

Whenever he offered to pay for her meals or other items, she always politely refused.

He needed to find a way around this.

"Hmm…"

Mcguire frowned, trying to devise a clever plan.

"Your magic circle isn't quite up to par."

Luna's mouth fell open at Mcguire's words.

"…Huh? Really?"

She hadn't thought there was anything wrong with her magic circle.

Naturally, she was taken aback by Mcguire's sudden critique, especially as he had always praised her work before.

However, a spark of hope ignited in her eyes.

Could there be a way to further optimize the circle's efficiency?

Setting the magic circle aside, Professor Mcguire pointed to its center.

"It's too weak."

“……I beg your pardon?"

"It's too weak."

Mcguire rummaged through a drawer and fetched a mana stone.

"This won't cut it. You need to aim for the top."

Mcguire placed the mana stone in front of Luna.

"I've made a wager with the other professors."

Mcguire smirked, revealing his gamble.

"I bet on you securing first place."

"M-me?"

Surprised, Luna pointed to herself, eyes wide with shock.

"Correct. With this magic circle, securing first place is next to impossible, don't you think?"

Truthfully, her magic circle had somewhat a chance of success.

But he wanted to challenge Luna, to spur her growth.

"Take this mana stone. Create a stronger magic circle and return as the winner."

He understood Luna's character quite well.

With this approach, Luna would not decline the mana stone.

If he simply gifted her the stone, she would have rejected it.

Mcguire's intuition was correct.

Luna's determination flared to life.

A sparkle appeared in her eyes at the prospect of helping the professor.

And she decided.

"I'll… return as the winner!"

With that, Luna gripped the mana stone firmly.

Mcguire couldn't help but smile.

-

"Luna Railer, let's begin."

With his words, Luna activated the cube she'd withdrawn from her pocket.

The cube expanded, and the black mana stone at its heart gleamed brilliantly.

'Activate the cube and…… '

Having done so, Luna focused on the scarecrow.

She carefully determined the coordinates of her target.

As she did so, Luna's gaze drifted towards the spectators.

To Rudy in particular.

'Rudy, I won't back down this time.'

She saw him there during Rie's performance.

But she didn't approach him.

It would distract her focus.

Her resolve to claim first place would waver.

Professor Mcguire had entrusted her with a mana stone and placed his faith in her.

She refused to let him down.

"Hmph!"

Having set the coordinates, Luna activated the cube.

The mana stone at the cube's core erupted with intense light.

The magic circle Luna made…

This circle housed a spell that overlapped several times on a single point and is then activated all at once at the pinpointed coordinates.

The main spell within the framework was a basic fire spell.

She had chosen it for its efficiency.

But with Mcguire's mana stone, she could pick a much more potent spell.

Luna considered her options.

What spell should she choose?

Then, she recalled a certain magic.

Professor Cromwell's telekinetic magic.

This type of magic was iconic within the Academy.

Only a select few among those of remarkable talent were chosen by Cromwell to learn it.

And it was magic with overwhelming power.

Although she could not cast it herself, she could incorporate it into the magic circle.

Inwardly, Luna shouted a single word.

'Gravity.'

-KWAGAGAGAGAK!!!!!

An immense force exerted itself on the small area housing the scarecrow.

Tiny pebbles surrounding the scarecrow disintegrated into sand, and the scarecrow itself began to bow under the gravitational pull.

"What… what is happening?"

Spectators stared, taken aback by the unfolding spectacle.

The scarecrow, unaffected by Rie's magic, now bent under Luna's spell.

-KWAHAAAK!

"Uh… uh!!!"

Luna groaned.

Though the mana stone was responsible for activating the spell, Luna was responsible for setting the coordinates.

So, Luna's mana continued to funnel into the mana stone.

She kept her focus, eyeing the scarecrow.

And gradually, the cube's operation stopped.

-PAKAK!

The black mana stone within the cube flared red, and only then did the cube retract, dropping into Luna's grasp.

"Hoo……”

She took a deep breath, then looked at the scarecrow.

The bottom had been shriveled and pressed down, its body bowing as if in reverence.

A wave of elation swept over Luna.

Then, she heard the announcer's declaration.

-Luna… Railer, with 4520 points, claims first place!

"—Hmm!"

Hearing the announcement, Luna pumped her fist, her face lit up with joy.

Her score nearly doubled Rie's.

She was the overwhelming first place.

"What just happened……”

And the crowd couldn't conceal their astonishment.

She had used telekinetic magic, said to be wielded exclusively by Cromwell's chosen few.

She used that spell as if to mock those chosen geniuses.

Of course, that hadn't been Luna's intention.

Nevertheless, it was enough to instill both shock and inspiration in the spectators.

Joyful, Luna departed the field.

-

She headed in Rudy's direction.

Beside Rudy stood Rie, her face contorted oddly.

"Rudy!"

As Luna called his name, Rudy returned a beaming smile and a thumbs up.

"Well done."

"Hehehe……”

"Uh…”

Rie, standing adjacent, eyed Luna with apparent annoyance.

Then, Luna beamed confidently and voiced her achievement.

"I secured first place in this assessment."

Luna confidently declared first place.

Rie frowned, but Rudy just chuckled.

"Do you want to watch me? I'm number 80."

"Huh? Absolutely!"

After nodding, Luna watched the assessment for a while.

Before long, the announcer's voice echoed again.

-Number 80, student Rudy Astria.

Upon hearing his name, Rudy turned to Luna and Rie, declaring,

"Luna, sorry, but I'll return after claiming the top spot."

"Huh?"

With that, Rudy briskly made his way to the field.

"Rudy Astria, let's start."

Without even properly positioning himself, he called for the start while still moving.

Luna and Rie exchanged puzzled glances, watching Rudy.

Not just them, but the surrounding spectators also stared at Rudy, perplexed.

Unfazed by their gazes, Rudy continued advancing.

He walked until he was near the scarecrow, and with about five steps remaining, he gripped his right wrist with his left hand and balled up his fist.

He twisted his waist, pulling his fist back as far as it would go.

In this stance, he launched towards the scarecrow.

"Huh?"

"What?"

Everyone looked on, shocked by his actions.

After all, it was a student from the magic department, charging with his fist raised.

And then…

-KWAAAAAAAAAAAAAANG!

Rudy's punch connected squarely with the scarecrow's face, toppling it over.

The scarecrow's face was slammed into the ground.

"This… can't be."

"What just happened?!"

Where the scarecrow's face had smashed into the ground, an indented and cracked patch marked the spot.

"Hoo!"

Rudy exhaled, loosening his shoulder and wrist.

His face showed neither joy nor surprise, just a matter-of-fact expression.

-Ru… Rudy A-a-astria!!!! He's scored 9510 points!!!!!

The announcer's voice, filled with excitement, echoed throughout the academy grounds.

CHAPTER 58
INDIVIDUAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT (4)

"Ouch…”

My arm and hand throbbed.

The rebound was now spreading throughout my body.

This is why I should've taken it easy……

"No working out for me."

I couldn't imagine doing any strenuous activity for at least two or three days.

Maybe a gentle run, but definitely no lifting.

-Please wait a moment… Maintenance is required. The next student in line, please stand by.

As the announcement ended, a few teachers approached the scarecrow.

They planned to switch out the scarecrow whose face I'd bashed in.

Ignoring them, I walked back to the crowd.

I saw Luna and Rie, their faces shocked.

"You said you were number one, right?"

"Rudy…!"

At my words, Luna beamed and shouted my name.

"You're incredible, Rudy!"

Luna wasn't upset about losing.

She was just happy for me.

But Rie looked rather annoyed.

"Where'd you learn that weird technique?"

At Rie's question, I smirked and answered,

"It's all thanks to dark magic."

"You're saying it's dark magic? Your body is hurt again, is that what dark magic is? Let me look."

Rie grumbled, examining my arm.

My veins stood out, colored in a strange light.

"Why are you hurting yourself for first place?"

"It meant something to me."

Despite the pain, I felt content.

With a score like mine, only someone like Astina could beat me.

There wasn't a first-year student who could top me now.

Then, the announcer's voice filled the air.

-Student number 85, please step forward and stand by! We'll resume the assessment shortly.

Hearing that, I turned to Rie and Luna.

"I have one more test left. I'll go and take that."

"Alright! Be safe!"

"I have my test too."

Leaving Rie and Luna behind, I went to take my test.

-

After finishing the test, I returned to the center.

-Student Riku, you've earned 220 points.

"Ugh…"

"Riku! Good job!"

Rie was gone, so Luna and I watched the assessment.

"How did you score almost 10,000 points?"

Riku asked, walking over to us.

"Effort."

She gave me a suspicious look.

So we were slowly moving towards the end.

Yet no one had surpassed my score, not even Rie's.

I watched the rest of the assessment, feeling relaxed.

Student number 102, Locke Lucarion, please step forward.

At that, Locke's name was called, and he walked from the crowd towards the center.

As Locke stepped forward, I focused my attention on him.

Locke was someone worth watching.

He played a significant role in the story, a potential ally when needed.

To make the most of him, I had to understand his strengths.

And I was curious.

Both Rie and Luna had progressed quicker than in the original story.

I wondered if Locke, being around them, had accelerated his growth too.

Locke gripped his sword, took his stance, and began to speak.

"Locke Lucarion, I'll start—"

"Locke Lucarion!!!! Go for the gold!!!!!!"

A muscular man suddenly yelled from behind.

It was Jackson Pumpkin, a Swordsmanship Department professor.

He cheered for Locke like a dad rooting for his kid at a sports match.

What's he up to?

I wondered as Locke looked at Jackson, seemingly puzzled as well.

Noticing the vein popping on Locke's forehead, he looked really irritated.

"Locke Lucarion… Let's get started."

Gritting his teeth, Locke said to start again.

He started to walk towards the scarecrow, sword in hand.

"Uh…?"

Typically, the students would charge the scarecrow, their swords glowing with power.

But Locke was just strolling up to the scarecrow, making Professor Jackson tense.

"Locke!!! You brat!!! Run!!!"

-Professor Jackson, we're in the middle of an assessment.

As Jackson yelled, the announcer reined him in.

"No, this is not acceptable!!!"

-Professor Jackson!

Locke kept walking until he reached the scarecrow.

He glanced at Jackson and smirked.

"This kid!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Poke.

With a treacherous smile, Locke jabbed the scarecrow with the tip of his sword.

-Uh…

The crowd stared, speechless at the scene and Jackson's outburst.

-Locke Lucarion. That's 1 point……

"Locke!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Jackson's anguished cry echoed around the field.

"Haha……"

I chuckled awkwardly, watching Jackson turn pale.

Even if Locke didn't do well here, Rie would still include him in the joint practical with the first and second years.

Locke's score was just a bit low……

After Locke, it was Evan's turn.

Evan was last.

-Lastly, student Evan, please come to the center.

"Whew!"

Evan walked onto the field, taking a deep breath, his sword in hand.

"Hmm……?"

I tilted my head at his choice.

As far as I knew, Evan didn't wield a sword for this test.

Evan's sword was a tool to block magic.

His primary attack was magic, the sword was just a defensive tool.

So why did he bring a sword?

There was no reason for that.

"Evan, begin."

With that, Evan dashed towards the scarecrow, sword in hand.

He ran like a seasoned warrior.

A faint aura of mana encased his blade.

"What is that……”

It wasn't a sword aura.

It was something altogether different.

Evan continued his charge.

As he neared the scarecrow, his sword swiped through the air.

It was a cleanly executed horizontal slash.

Then……

"It's sliced……”

The scarecrow was perfectly bisected along the path of his sword.

Cut as smoothly as a radish.

I leapt to my feet in surprise.

"Why does he already have……”

It was clear what it was.

Andrei's sword.

A sword capable of severing mana.

A sword that projected its own mana to cut through an opponent's.

However, this description was somewhat inaccurate.

The sword could sever materialized magic.

It severed materialized magic with its own mana.

That was its power.

But there was a drawback.

The sword was unable to sever unmaterialized magic.

It could cut through elemental magic like fire or water, but telekinetic magic, unmaterialized, remained untouched.

However, Evan had later overcome this limitation.

Magic that sliced through the intangible, unmaterialized magic.

He had developed this magic himself.

The theory was easy enough to explain.

In essence, it was about materializing intangible magic.

But any fledgling wizard would understand the complex and near-impossible nature of such a feat.

Though this magic was dependent on Andrei's sword, it was undeniably incredible.

How is he using it already?

To use that magic, Evan experimented on the scarecrow in the training field for hundreds of hours.

To have acquired it already, and to be using it now……

What could have brought about such a change……

Was it because of before when I punched a hole into the scarecrow?

Did he train to destroy it as well?

But this brought about new concerns.

If he'd learned this technique now, it would cause issues during the combined first and second-year practical.

It was a technique he shouldn't have learned yet.

Silence.

The field fell quiet.

-That…… Student Evan……

The announcer's voice cut through the silence.

What followed was even more shocking.

-0…… You score 0 points.

“……What?"

Evan, seemingly in disbelief, questioned the announcer.

-That…… It's a 0 point, right?

Ah……?

Hearing that, something clicked.

The scarecrow contained both magic that quantified impact and enhancement magic.

Yet when Evan severed the magic, it seemed he had inadvertently destroyed the magic that quantified the impact.

-That…… Please hold. We will discuss with the assessing professor and re-announce the score.

Following the announcer's pause.

-We will now announce the score of student Evan.

-Student Evan's score is 0 points.

-We have decided to award 0 points, judging a lack of understanding of the assessment. So, we will not include it in the ranking. However……

-The purpose of this assessment is to display superior skills, and we acknowledge there was a flaw in the assessment. Therefore, we will grant you the maximum score.

"What……”

I listened to the announcer's words with a sense of disbelief.

So, was I first?

Or, was I second?

It seemed I wasn't alone in my confusion.

The other students were also murmuring amongst themselves.

I recalled a wizard-themed movie where a certain dormitory was suddenly stripped of their first-place status.

Was this a case of being stripped of the top spot?

-

I sat in my seat, feeling oddly deflated.

Even though I had achieved first place in the assessment, the bitter feeling lingered.

No, it wasn't merely Evan being granted first place in the assessment, but more so the ambiguity of the results that left a bad taste in my mouth.

While I was lost in thought, the students around me began to gradually disperse.

"Rudy, aren't you leaving?"

Luna tilted her head and asked me.

"Ah, I'm staying to watch the second-grade assessment."

The first-grade assessment had ended, but the second-grade assessment was still to come.

Yet, everyone else was leaving.

There were a few reasons for this.

Firstly, the capabilities of the second graders were widely recognized.

Having spent over a year at the academy, their skills were well known.

So, there was no need to watch them again.

Additionally, it was a given that Astina would secure first place.

Given this predictable outcome, many lost interest and left.

Most likely, those who remained were eager to see just how remarkable Astina's abilities were.

"You're staying to see Astina's assessment?"

"Well, I want to see Astina's assessment, but there's someone else I want to watch."

-First up, student Borval. Please approach the center.

After all, I needed to observe the performance of someone who shared the same teacher as me.

Borval, with a colossal ax slung over his shoulder, made his way onto the field.

CHAPTER 59
INDIVIDUAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT (5)

"-20810 points! Amazing! Student Borval!!"

The announcer's voice rang out in excitement.

Borval had outperformed me by a huge margin.

"Wow…"

Borval's axe had cleaved through scarecrow's head, continuing through its body.

It was a sight showcasing the might of a barbarian warrior—or maybe, a barbarian wizard?

Regardless, his power was undeniable.

An unexpected talent had risen to the spotlight.

Borval, not a particularly distinguished student academically, nor notable in other activities, had been quietly sharpening his abilities.

And today was his day to shine.

The few spectators couldn't help but express surprise at this unexpected show of talent.

After propping up the scarecrow with his foot, Borval yanked out his axe, hoisted it onto his shoulder, and looked up.

His gaze landed on Astina.

With a look of challenge in his eyes, he left the square.

"Great job, Borval," I greeted Borval as he walked away.

"You, are you okay?"

"Well, I'm not dying."

"Use only as much as your body can handle. It could lead to big problems otherwise."

Borval gave me advice, perhaps knowing that I had used abilities beyond my limits.

Despite his rugged exterior, his words were caring.

"Thanks," I responded with a small smile.

Luna, standing next to me, also smiled at Borval.

"Hello! Great job!"

After a moment's stare at Luna, Borval turned to me.

“…Is she your girlfriend?"

"Excuse me?"

"Eh? What? Huh?"

Luna and I blinked in surprise at Borval's unexpected question.

"I think I'm getting in the way here. I'm going to see Professor Robert."

"No, it's not…”

But before we could correct him, Borval was gone.

What were we supposed to do when he disappeared like that?

"Luna, he's not usually like that……”

I said, trying to dispel the awkwardness.

"Ye-yes, he seems nice!"

Luna stammered, flustered.

"Le-let's go check the scores! Wow! I, I'm excited! For the seniors' matches!"

As Luna tried to change the topic, I nodded.

"Ye-yeah, sure."

So we returned to checking the scores.

"Gi-girlfriend…"

Luna muttered, like a broken doll.

I could only respond with an awkward chuckle.

-

Astina, due to her role as the student council president, observed the assessment from a separate seat.

"Why is everyone acting so strangely during this assessment…" Astina frowned, murmuring to herself.

After Luna and Borval had completed their turn, both glanced her way.

The other students continued to showcase their abilities, each one more impressive than the last.

"In this situation, how am I supposed to control myself?"

Astina hadn't prepared for an assessment of this kind.

Truthfully, there was no need for her to flaunt her skills in a competition like this.

Her abilities were well-known within the academy, so there was no point in proving them again.

Furthermore, a good performance wouldn't enhance her reputation—she had already claimed the position of successor and was also the student council president.

Her status was as high as it could possibly be.

"-Astina Persia, please step forward."

"Ugh…"

Astina let out a sigh as she walked onto the square.

The first-year students and Borval had set the bar incredibly high with their impressive abilities.

The audience had high expectations for her assessment.

Astina took her place and whispered to herself.

"I suppose I need to meet their expectations."

Meeting expectations was also part of her role.

"Astina Persia. Let's begin."

With that, Astina extended her hand towards the scarecrow.

Her mana began to fluctuate.

The air started to vibrate in response to her immense mana.

"Gravity," Astina murmured, directing her mana.

-Crack!

A strange sound resonated from the scarecrow, reminiscent of a death knell.

"What…"

The spectators watched, mouths agape.

The scarecrow had been crushed as if it were made of tin.

Her magic was not as flashy as Rie's, not as shocking as Borval's or Rudy's, and not as

unique as Evan's.

She had simply crumpled the scarecrow.

That was all.

It was a brief spell, seemingly mocking the extravagant spells of others.

It also demonstrated what could happen when Luna's Gravity spell was used correctly.

-Astina Persia… 42100 points…

It was pure, overwhelming power.

Astina's assessment met everyone's high expectations.

It demonstrated who was the strongest and most exceptional individual in the academy at that moment.

-

That evening, the professors who had placed bets met in Professor Cromwell's lab.

Sitting quietly, sipping their tea, no one spoke a word.

The room was as serene as a still lake.

“…So who won?"

Professor Jackson was the first to disrupt the peace.

"Obviously, it's Rudy Astria. Weren't we betting on who would rank first in the assessment?"

Professor Robert said with a smirk.

"But, considering grades, Evan is at the top," Cromwell pointed out, staring at Robert.

"Weren't we just basing this on the assessment?"

"But the assessment determines the grades."

Tension sparked between Robert and Cromwell.

Professor Jackson quietly interjected at that point.

"But… didn't Evan actually rank lower than our Locke?"

Upon hearing Jackson's remark, McGuire smacked him on the back of his head.

"You be quiet. This is all because of you."

"Ugh…"

The full story was this:

Professor Jackson had been blabbering about the bet to other professors.

Consequently, the professor in charge of the assessment, half jokingly and half seriously, separated the assessment and the grades.

He awarded Evan the highest grades and Rudy the top assessment score.

So, the bet became muddled.

What started as a light-hearted wager had evolved into a significant matter for the professors, who prided themselves on their students.

These professors, who devoted their free time to research and did not mind being on duty, could just stay within the academy and focus on their research.

But this was a question of pride.

When on a duty shift, how much teasing would they receive from other professors?

"You don't care about your students," or "You should have better trained your disciple."

Rather than hearing such remarks, professors would rather bite their tongues.

Professor Robert spoke with a smirk.

"By the assessment, Rudy Astria was first. However, that oddball managed to get top grades using some strange technique."

At this, Professor Cromwell chuckled.

"That's because there was a flaw in the assessment, as the overseeing professor admitted."

Just as it seemed the bet would reach no resolution, Professor Jackson voiced his frustration.

"Argh! Let's have a rematch!"

"That sounds like a great plan, Jackson."

McGuire clapped as if he had made an extraordinary discovery.

At this, both Robert and Cromwell looked flabbergasted.

"That's ridiculous."

"If you're going to say that, we two will decide it, so you both can leave."

"Hmph."

Cowed by the firm words of Professors Cromwell and Robert, the pair fell silent.

After contemplating for a moment, Professor McGuire proposed.

"So, you're saying either of them could have been first if they had been evaluated properly?"

"Of course."

"Obviously."

At their confirmation, Professor McGuire chuckled.

"Then let's determine the winner based on the higher score in the joint first and second-year practical. That seems fair, right? Besides, Cromwell and I will oversee that assessment to ensure there are no mishaps."

At McGuire's suggestion, Cromwell laughed.

"That's an excellent idea."

"I agree."

Robert also rose from his seat, voicing his agreement.

"Then let's go with that."

-

While the professors were having such a conversation……

"Haah…"

In her room, Rie sighed.

She was deep in thought, absentmindedly twirling a pen on her desk.

The performances of Luna and Rudy, who scored higher than her, echoed in her mind.

The pair had displayed an overwhelming mastery among the first-year students.

They seemed to have grown tremendously over the break.

"No…… That was just a simple assessment."

Rie spoke, hier gaze cast downward.

She thought this assessment was really nothing.

It didn't provide a proper evaluation of an individual but scrutinized a single skill.

Therefore, she reasoned, her low grade didn't reflect her true capabilities.

Really, she didn't know what to do when she saw the others who were running ahead of her.

Rie had been diligent in her own way.

She summoned elementals, and her study of magic remained consistent.

Yet, despite her efforts, it seemed as though the others were outpacing her.

This unfamiliar situation was very confusing for Rie.

"That's right, I didn't make a mistake."

She didn't lose.

She was merely adopting a different approach.

All she has to do is prove it in a proper assessment.

Rie clenched her fist resolutely.

Picking up her calendar, she drew a bear's face on the date of the joint first and second-year practical.

It meant it was very important.

Rie's eyes burned with determination.

CHAPTER 60
JOINT PRACTICAL (1)

Days flew by since the end of the individual skills assessment.

Now, the first and second years were gearing up for their joint practical.

Every year, depending on who was in charge, it would change a bit, but the overall structure remained the same.

Hearing about the updated rules, I headed to the bulletin board.

There, I ran into Rie.

"You're here," I greeted, lifting my hand slightly.

"It's been a while."

I hadn't seen Rie much lately.

Despite being at the same academy, I had no idea where she spent her time.

She didn't stand out.

We used to bump into each other during magic practice, but since the end of the assessment, those classes were on hold.

"Did the rules come out?" I asked.

Rie simply nodded and pointed to the bulletin board.

The notice read:

[

Battle Royale

-Each student must find two members to form a team of three.

-The team members are not restricted by grade. (However, those who achieved ranks 1-3 in the individual assessment cannot be in the same team as the top three in the same grade.)

-Anyone from the first and second grades can be the captain.

-The location is Mount Malt.

-Teams compete against each other on the mountain, earning points by defeating other team captains.

-Points depend on the number of teams the defeated team has beaten. (If no teams have been beaten, it's counted as one point.)

-The practical lasts for 5 hours. Ranks are determined by total points earned.

(Note: Second-grade top scorer, Astina, due to her student council duties, is excluded from the activity and given a score equal to the first place in this assessment.)

(Note: Evan, a first-year magic department student, is treated the same as ranks 1-3.)

]

The rules were simpler than I expected.

But one part caught my eye: students ranking 1-3 in the assessment can't be on the same team.

It looked like a response to the unusually high scores of the top-ranking students.

Mulling over this rule, I realized that Rie, Luna, and I couldn't be on the same team.

The rule also mentioned Evan, but that wasn't important.

None of us were planning to team up with him.

But the key phrase here was 'in the same grade'.

That meant top-ranking students from the first and second grades could join forces.

This must've been introduced to avoid reducing the grading variance if top students from the same grade teamed up.

"If only Astina could join…"

Astina was barred from this event, for good reason.

The balance would shatter if she participated, probably taking down everyone single-handedly.

That's why everyone agreed to this special rule, happy to hear that someone would get the same score as Astina.

But even without Astina, I had another potential teammate—Borval, the second place ranker in the second-year assessment.

Teaming up with Borval seemed like a good idea.

Just as I was about to head over, a troubling thought crossed my mind.

How would student safety be ensured during this event?

With each participant having potentially lethal skills, it seemed likely injuries, or even deaths, could happen.

When I voiced this concern to Rie, her response surprised me.

"There are teaching assistants, right?"

"Teaching… assistants?"

In a world without surveillance tools like CCTV, it appeared teaching assistants filled that role.

I could almost hear their distant cries of despair.

-

Making my way towards Borval, I decided to secure my spot in his team before anyone else could.

"Alright. I can trust you," he quickly agreed to my proposal.

However, there was one issue.

"Borval, I need to operate alone. Please work with the other team members."

He looked confused.

"Acting alone… Is that confidence? You think you can beat teams by yourself?"

"I have some personal matters to attend to."

"Oh… personal matters."

Borval chuckled, muscles twitching with curiosity.

"So you're saying you have someone to fight personally?"

"Something like that."

His face lit up.

"That's what I like to hear. Well, there's no other opportunity for students to fight like this. Good. Just don't lose."

With Borval's hearty laugh ringing in my ears, I excused myself.

"Then I'll get going. There's a lot to prepare."

"Alright. Prepare well."

As I moved away, my mind was racing.

The joint practical of the first and second years was approaching, and there was something I had to do—stop Evan.

During this joint practical, there was one person Evan should not encounter—Anton

Fred, a second-year student.

He was the son of a family working with the dean, Oliver.

If Evan met Anton, there'd be repercussions, a hidden story intertwined with the dean.

And that was something I needed to prevent.

If Anton meets Evan during the joint practical, Anton suffers a great defeat.

Anton, humiliated by such a loss to a commoner, would seek revenge after the event.

But his own power was not enough.

He'd resort to leveraging his family's influence, leading to an orchestrated accident that Dean Oliver takes advantage of.

If the story goes on normally, Oliver would fall without anyone knowing.

However, if this hidden story unfolds, you would have to fight him, as he tries to manipulate the situation.

That's why I had originally planned to focus my efforts on preventing Evan's involvement in the joint practical—to stop this hidden story from occurring…

The issue, however, was Evan's new technique.

This technique disrupted the existing balance.

It wasn't merely the power to sever intangible magic.

If applied correctly, this skill could set the mana of anyone it touched into disarray.

An ordinary wizard might manage to some degree, but for someone like me, who must finely manipulate mana, Evan was the worst possible opponent.

Ideally, I would have partnered with Borval to face Evan, but then my grades would be at risk. Battling Evan would be time-consuming, and to achieve high marks, we would need to take down numerous teams.

Challenging Evan alongside Borval just wasn't a time-efficient strategy.

Therefore, Borval needed to take care of my grades for me.

"I'll need to do a lot of preparation……"

I headed to the library first.

I had promised to study with Luna, and planned to prepare weapons for the practical while reading books.

"Ah, Rudy. You're here?"

Luna sat amidst a mound of books, dark circles highlighting her fatigue.

"Luna, you seem quite worn out."

"Really? I don't feel that tired…"

Luna countered, her hand instinctively reaching up to touch her face, even as fatigue painted her features.

Luna was clearly preparing intensely to get good grades.

The second semester's joint practical for the first and second years held as much weight as midterms or finals.

Students worked themselves to their limits to get a higher score.

"But take some breaks in between. You'll collapse before the practical starts."

"Alright! Thanks for your concern, Rudy," she responded with a warm smile.

Then, as if something had just occurred to her, Luna asked, "By the way, have you figured out your group members yet?"

"For now, I'm teamed up with Borval."

"Borval? You've picked a great team member! Wouldn't a group with you and Borval be nearly guaranteed victory?"

I gave an awkward smile and shook my head, knowing the battle ahead would be far from simple.

While Borval and I might excel at individual assessments, the joint practical was a completely different beast.

Our techniques were good for demonstrating explosive power against a stationary target.

They weren't sustainable in the long run.

The difference between fighting a human opponent versus a straw doll was big.

After all, no one in a real fight would simply stand still and take a hit.

"What about you, Luna? Have you teamed up with Ena and Riku?"

"Yes! I don't have any seniors I know."

Despite Luna's words, the reality was that most seniors would jump at the chance to partner with her.

Luna was well aware of this.

Yet, in keeping with her character, she wouldn't abandon the people she spent every day with, Riku and Ena, for a chance at better grades.

Looking at Luna like that, I opened my mouth with a smile.

"Well, I won't go easy on you when we meet."

"I won't go easy on you either, so be careful~"

Luna retorted, a gleam in her eye.

Our laughter echoed through the library.

In the middle of it all, a thought crossed my mind.

"Ah, Luna."

I began, recalling the second purpose of my visit to the library.

"Don't you have something to tell me?"

Her gaze faltered at my question.

Considering Luna's grouping with Ena and Riku, scoring high might prove a challenge, given that the practical involved second-year students too.

Even for Luna, who was an outstanding first-year, might not succeed.

So, Luna needed a 'weapon'.

"No, nothing," she replied, her voice a mere whisper.

Seeing her evade my question filled me with regret.

Luna had been skittish ever since vacation ended.

Despite my repeated attempts to approach the topic, she remained the same.

Luna needed Levian's magic book now more than ever, for her grades and for others.

Despite my indirect hints, she seemed terrified of something.

With a gentle smile, I said, "Then whenever you have something to tell me, just say it. I'll be waiting."

CHAPTER 61
JOINT PRACTICAL (2)

Books were scattered untidily across the desk, pens were rolling about, and papers with magic circles were pinned about haphazardly.

This was Luna's workspace.

After achieving impressive grades last semester, she'd been rewarded with her own desk in a study room.

Typically, the room would be bustling with other students, but since it was late, she found herself alone.

She sat at her desk, deep in thought.

"Just about two weeks left…”

Luna murmured, her eyes landing on the words 'Joint Practical' marked on the calendar.

"Can I become stronger by then…?"

Luna already knew the answer.

Conventional methods wouldn't bring about dramatic improvements in such a short period.

She could consolidate her existing abilities through studying and training, but two weeks was hardly enough to explore new avenues.

Yet, there was an option - Levian's spellbook.

If she reclaimed the spellbook she'd given to Rudy, she could wield a new, unconventional weapon alongside her original skills.

But Luna was scared.

Memories of the library engulfed in flames, panicking students, Rie and Astina working tirelessly to control the situation, and Rudy nursing his wounds swirled in her mind.

The chaos caused by that spellbook had hurt many, either directly or indirectly.

The thought of such an incident recurring made her apprehensive about using the spellbook again.

"Can I control that spellbook in my current state?"

Luna questioned, clutching her head.

Her desire for strength could harm those around her.

Ena and Riku, who would be in her group for the joint practical, could be in danger if she used the spellbook near them.

She might ruin the assessment, or worse, hurt her friends.

Luna was terrified of this.

She was frightened of the prospect of losing everything just for the sake of gaining strength, of causing harm, and of being abandoned by everyone around her.

"Is it right for me to make this choice just because I want to become stronger?"

Luna yearned for strength but not at the expense of her friendships.

She hated the idea of causing harm and didn't want to be a burden.

But at the same time, she yearned for greater grades and more powerful magic.

Luna found herself thinking back to Rudy's playful challenge.

-I won't go easy on you when we meet.

Even though they had both joked about it, she wondered if she could truly do her

best if they crossed paths in the practical.

To secure top grades, Luna realized she might have to compete against her friends.

They'd always competed for ranks during exams, but directly fighting a friend felt distinctly different from merely outscoring them.

Could she bring herself to hinder her friends for her own benefit?

As she wrestled with this question, the night deepened around her.

-

The following day found Luna in Professor Mcguire's lab, looking over a scroll with a magic circle.

She had bought the scroll specifically for the joint practical.

Yet, progress was slow, the worries from last night still casting a shadow over her thoughts.

Watching Luna, Professor Mcguire eventually rose from his seat and approached her.

"Luna, is your preparation going well?"

Startled, Luna looked up. "Ah, Professor."

Sensing her struggle, he suggested, "If you're finding it hard to concentrate, perhaps you could use a break, maybe some fresh air?"

Luna shook her head, fists clenched with determination.

"No! I'll try to concentrate."

Mcguire observed her for a moment, then pulled over a chair and sat across from her.

"Luna, do you realize that worries only grow if you bottle them up? The more you dwell on them, the more they expand, like bubbles."

He offered a gentle smile.

"But even if you don't find a solution right away, speaking about them can help you shake them off."

He gestured to himself.

"Why not think of me as a wall and try to shake off your worries?"

Luna hesitated, her fingers fiddling anxiously.

After glancing between the floor and Mcguire, she cautiously spoke.

"What do I want to do?"

"What?" echoed Professor Mcguire, his smile warm and encouraging.

"I joined the academy because I wanted to learn magic. But now, I'm not so sure. I just want to enjoy my time with my friends."

In response to Luna's confession, Mcguire gently probed, "Can't you do both? Learn magic and maintain your friendships."

"I want to do both, I can. But if I use certain methods to get ahead, it might not work out that way."

"Why?"

"I'm worried I might upset my friends…"

Upon hearing this, Mcguire took a moment to ponder before asking, "So, you fear your friends will leave you?"

Luna nodded.

"In that case, would you leave your friends if they upset you?"

"No! I…"

Luna started, taken aback by the question, but she faltered, unable to continue.

"Do you believe your friends would abandon you if you upset them?"

“…No. They're all really kind and good friends…”

Seeing Luna's response, Mcguire smiled and opened his mouth to speak.

"Isn't it alright then? Nobody's perfect. We all make mistakes that may inconvenience or even upset others. But nobody holds that against you. We've all been a burden to someone else at some point. Rather than fretting over being a burden, wouldn't it be more constructive to focus on how you can help them?"

At Mcguire's words, Luna just stared.

"But… I could hurt my friends, ruin their grades."

"But it's also possible that you won't, right?"

"…”

Mcguire rose from his chair.

"Think about it carefully. Is your choice truly a hindrance to others? Or, just an opportunity for you to grow."

-

Later that night.

"You have a thoughtful friend."

Professor Mcguire mused aloud as he gazed out his window, savoring his wine.

Yesterday, he'd had a visitor.

It was Rudy Astria.

"Luna seems troubled these days," Rudy had informed him.

"Oh, really? What seems to be bothering her?"

"I'm not entirely sure."

Rudy had then asked Mcguire a favor.

"Could you lend her your ear?"

"You want me to listen, so you can find out what Luna's concerns are?"

Rudy shook his head.

"No, I simply want you to hear her out."

Mcguire had frowned at that.

"Why not lend her your ear then?"

"It's a worry that I'm not able to listen to."

"Do you have an inkling of what this concern might be?"

Rudy hadn't answered.

Mcguire sighed and conceded, "Alright, I'll do as you asked."

He raised his wine glass in a solitary toast.

"Reminds me of the old days…"

Mcguire, Cromwell, Robert— they'd all had such worries back then.

Matters that felt of immense significance yet were somewhat trivial in retrospect.

They had grown through sharing troubles and also through suffering alone.

He saw echoes of those days in Luna and Rudy.

But their relationship was slightly different.

Rudy seemed to act as Luna's sponsor.

Certainly, he officially held that role, but Mcguire observed that it was often Rudy guiding Luna, providing subtle answers to her concerns, clearing her path.

"Is this the right way…”

When a bear raises its cub, it doesn't only give it fish but also teaches it how to catch them.

This ensures the cub's survival when it's on its own.

However, looking at Luna and Rudy's relationship…

"If Rudy were gone, would Luna be able to stand on her own…”

Rudy possessed the strength to forge his path, even without Luna.

But for Luna…

Mcguire looked up at the moon.

His tenure as a professor had been long, and he considered himself an adult with plenty of experience.

But facing this situation, he was reminded of his own inadequacies.

"I wonder what tomorrow's weather will bring."

Mcguire gazed skyward, muttering to himself.

-

Several days later.

I found myself in an academy laboratory, preoccupied with a series of experiments.

This was the 'weapon' meant for the upcoming joint practical.

With the joint practical drawing nearer, this marked the final experiment before its was completed.

What nagged at my mind, though, was that Luna hadn't yet come to see me.

Only a handful of days remained…

I thought it best to hand it over to her before the joint practical.

But it seemed Luna wasn't quite ready.

I could just pass over the spellbook to her, but that would be meaningless.

I believed she could grow the most when she felt the need and became desperate for it.

"Ha… I hope this works out."

Just as I was about to start the experiment, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

A voice sounded from outside.

"Rudy, may I enter?"

The voice belonged to Luna.

"Of course, come in."

At my reply, Luna swung the door open and stepped inside.

Her face held an air of unwavering determination.

Seeing this change in Luna, I couldn't help but smile.

"Do you have something to say?"

At this, Luna nodded slightly.

"Could I have it… returned now?"

I moved over to the bag I had stashed to one side and took out Luna's spellbook.

As I placed the spellbook firmly into Luna's hand, our eyes locked.

"Give it everything you've got."

With these words, Luna's face lit up with a vibrant smile as she replied,

“…Yes!"

CHAPTER 62
JOINT PRACTICAL (3)

We were standing somewhere in the mountains.

It was ablaze with the colors of fall, tinted in hues of red.

A cool wind rustled the trees, making the autumn leaves flutter to the ground.

Borval swept away the drifting leaves with a casual wave of his hand.

Then, he turned to me and said,

"So, you're going solo."

"Yes, I'm off right away."

"Well then, I guess I'm stuck with this fellow."

Borval gestured towards the man standing next to him.

"Pl, ple, please take care…"

"Sure, I got it."

Borval interrupted him, leaving him mid-sentence.

He didn't seem very reliable.

Seeing Borval like this, I felt a twinge of guilt.

I had been scrambling to find another partner besides Borval before the joint practical started.

However, finding just one person was challenging.

Given that the exercise involved teams of three, many groups were formed from familiar faces.

When three strangers teamed up, their individual strengths only added up.

But when well-matched people joined teams, their power multiplied, even squared.

Hence, the stronger students paired up with those who complimented their abilities.

I felt the limit of my social circle since I couldn't partner with Rie, Luna, or Astina.

While I was busy worrying and looking around, I spotted a familiar face.

It was the red-haired guy who had given me trouble at the start of the first term.

"Hey, what was your name again?"

"My, my name is Jet William!"

"Right, Jet, give it your all."

Jet, whom I had 'educated' a bit at the start of the term, shivered every time he saw me.

Even when I told him to drop the formalities, he kept them up anyway.

I just looked at him with a smirk.

After Garwel left, Jet was left aimless at the academy.

The mischief-makers he hung out with were all lower nobles.

Without a leader, their group fell apart.

These days, he seemed to be quietly attending his classes.

I wasn't sure how competent he was, but with Borval on our side, even if three first-year students attacked, we could handle it.

So, this guy was just to make up the numbers.

Moreover, since I had instilled a decent amount of fear in him, he would probably obey without question.

This meant I could direct him as I saw fit.

"It's about to start soon."

As Borval spoke, a firework lit up the sky.

-Bang!

The firework signaled the start of the event.

"Shall we move then?"

At Borval's words, I sprang into action.

-

"Aaaargh!!!"

"She should have just handed it over."

Rie chuckled, watching the person tumble down, amused.

Locke stepped forward and plucked a small gem from the pocket of the fallen participant.

The gem Locke held was a marker for scoring points.

Everyone was given one, and if you managed to attach the captain's gem to your own, you could snatch all their accumulated points.

"Indeed, it's Rie."

Said their third teammate.

He hailed from the Petro family, well-known for their prowess in alchemy.

"Yes," Rie acknowledged.

She didn't know him too well, but as an alchemy student, he was useful.

"Hmmm……”

Rie mused while walking.

Points were slowly stacking up, but securing first place seemed a tough feat at this pace.

Truthfully, Rie was confident in her own abilities.

Even without Astina, she was a formidable opponent.

And having Locke made them a terrifying team, making other participants wary.

However, this made it challenging to clinch the top spot.

Most teams would bolt at the sight of Rie, instead of facing her head-on.

So, a chase ensued, which wasted precious time.

"Locke, from now on, you'll operate independently," Rie declared.

"Independently?"

"Yes, don't waste time hunting the strong ones. Pick off the ones you can easily beat."

Keeping Locke by her side was a misuse of his swift movement.

Rie and the kid from the Petro family couldn't move as quickly.

It was best for him to go solo, taking down the weaker teams.

"Got it. I'll head south."

"Good, we'll take the north."

Upon hearing Rie's words, Locke sprang into action.

-

I was alone, meandering through the woods.

I encountered several teams, but none were a challenge.

The clever ones fled at the sight of me, but most chose to face off, seeing me alone.

Borval was our team captain, but those we ran into had no way of knowing.

They assumed that I, with my high assessment scores, was the captain and fought with me.

"They should at least try to recognize teams with high-ranking players."

There was nothing to gain in fighting me, a mere team member.

They were like moths drawn to a flame.

I needed to reach Evan quickly, but the constant interruptions were testing my patience.

After covering some distance, I fished out a scroll from my bag.

As I tore it open, a map materialized in the air.

A single dot marked the map.

"Hmm… Hard to track when it keeps moving."

That dot represented Astina's magic energy.

More accurately, it pointed to Yeniel, who was linked by Astina's magic.

In this exam, Astina was part of the safety committee, stationed outside the test area.

So, tracking down Astina's magic would lead me to Yeniel.

The day after learning about Astina's absence from the exam, I sought her out.

I had prepared a magic search circle using Astina's mana, confident that Evan would be on the same team as Yeniel.

"Hmm… Southwards, it seems."

Evan's team was constantly moving within the southern region.

The floating map dissolved into thin air once its duration expired.

"Time to get moving," I murmured.

As I prepared to set off, a figure in the distance caught my eye—someone was swiftly advancing toward me.

"What's going on?"

The individual bore a sword at his hip and was running at an impressive speed, a clear sign of belonging to the Swordsmanship Department.

His lone figure suggested he wasn't just another participant.

As he drew closer, he began to slow down.

"Huh?"

He slowed to a stop, hopping in my direction.

"What are you doing here?"

"Locke?"

I recognized him.

"Oh, what a pleasant surprise," I greeted Locke.

Neither of us felt compelled to fight.

If Rie had been in his place, conflict might have broke out, but Locke, like me, was merely a team member.

He knew I wasn't the captain; confrontation between us was pointless.

"Why are you alone? Where's Rie?"

"Rie can handle herself. She's decided to go alone to accumulate more points."

"Is that so?"

A smirk crept onto my face at his words.

"Hey, could you do me a favor? I have some valuable information to share."

"Information?"

"Yes. Don't you want to score big?"

I proposed, cleverly weaving in a touch of deceit.

I've decided to use Locke to my advantage.

-

Meanwhile, in the northern reaches of the forest.

"Luna, you're incredible! Well done!"

Riku sprinted into Luna's arms, praising her.

"Yeah! Ena and Riku, you both did fantastic too!"

Luna beamed at Riku.

"What did I do exactly?"

Ena approached, curious.

"Hey, the amount of useful potions you brought made our fight much more manageable!"

Luna's words coaxed a smile onto Ena's face.

"But what's with the robe? It's remarkably durable."

Luna was sporting a black robe.

"Hehe, it's a gift," she replied, clutching it tightly.

Rudy had given it to her, a sturdy piece fashioned from wyvern skin.

Luna's team consisted of members from the Magic and Alchemy Departments, leaving them without a frontline.

Consequently, Luna often bore the brunt of the attacks, facing several dangerous situations.

However, her robe was strong enough to deflect all attacks.

Even when she did get hit, the attacks barely left a dent.

Besides, Ena's stock of healing potions offered a safety net, but the defensive strength of the robe allowed Luna to act more bravely.

"Our score is steadily rising."

"Do you think we have a shot at first place?"

Ena examined the score and asked.

Riku pumped her fist energetically in response.

"I hope so."

Luna shared a smile with the two.

She adjusted the small bag on her back; it was housing a spellbook.

Frankly, she hadn't had much use for it since getting it back, but she decided to bring it along as a precaution.

However, there's been no need it for so far.

Most battles were won using pre-prepared scrolls or the cube she made for the individual assessment.

"Shall we continue?"

As Luna was about to go forward, she caught sight of a familiar face in the distance.

"Ah……”

It was a face she was happy to see, but one she couldn't afford to engage with right now.

"Riku, Ena……! We need to hide!"

Luna whispered urgently to her companions.

Following her command, Riku and Ena immediately crouched.

Despite their efforts, their location was far from inconspicuous.

This mountainous region bore many clearings where trees were sparse.

Their attempts to camouflage themselves in the open were futile.

"Ena, Riku, stay low and let's head towards those trees……”

"Why are we hiding?"

Ena asked as she saw Luna's hurried actions.

However, the answer became apparent almost immediately.

"I saw your fight."

They approached with grins plastered on their faces.

Riku and Ena tensed, their expressions turning rigid at the sight.

"Ah……”

And the face of the figure approaching them also stiffened.

"Lu……. Luna?"

That person was none other than Rie.

CHAPTER 63
JOINT PRACTICAL (4)

"So, we plan to take on a strong guy and grab his points in one go?"

"Exactly. And it's no big deal if we lose."

Since we weren't in charge, a loss wouldn't risk too much.

Locke appeared to agree, nodding in understanding.

"Can we win this fight?"

I shot Locke a sly grin.

"Doubting yourself? We aren't picking a fight with Astina."

At this, Locke stared at me, his eyes like daggers.

"I'm not doubting. It's just that you're not strong."

"Who are you calling weak? You only earned one point in the individual assessment."

Locke clenched his teeth at my words.

"So, who's our opponent?"

"I won't spill. You might betray me if I do."

Locke's desire to win flared, just as planned.

I figured he only agreed because he thought he'd gain something from it.

After making up his mind, Locke broke the silence.

"How will we split the points?"

"Fifty-fifty."

I replied with a smile.

"You'll get half."

-

"Luna……”

Rie leaned over as Luna attempted to slip away.

"Oh… Hi, Rie."

Luna got up and acknowledged Rie.

She looked shocked.

Rie's expression mirrored her surprise.

She thought she might encounter a familiar face, but seeing one in person was still a shock.

Rie stared at Luna.

"That robe……”

She mumbled, quietly enough for no one else to hear.

It was the robe that Rudy had bought from the Persia region.

"Hmm……”

Rie sighed and shook her head.

Just then, Luna cautiously began to speak.

"Rie… I don't want to fight you……”

Luna's voice trembled.

Her hesitation didn't stem from Rie's strength or the fear of defeat.

She simply didn't want to fight with a friend.

She preferred to compete for ranks without resorting to a fight here.

Rie was a cherished friend to Luna.

"Luna."

Rie's voice was firm.

"I'm sorry. This is a test. To rank high, this is the right choice."

A Sylph materialized behind Rie.

Suddenly, Riku yelled from Luna's back.

"Luna!!! Get ready to fight!!!"

"Ah!!"

Startled, Luna hastily grabbed a scroll from her bag.

Rie didn't waste a second.

"Sylph."

A powerful gust of wind emerged.

The wind morphed into a blade and hurtled towards Luna.

The blade was fast, reaching Luna before she could tear the scroll.

"Eek…!"

She quickly bent over and shielded herself with the robe.

The wind blade struck Luna's robe.

The force pushed Luna back, but fortunately, she wasn't severely hurt.

While she had no injuries, she noticed…

"My… my robes……"

Luna saw the scratches on her robe from the blade.

Although her robe had shielded her, it hadn't fully deflected the direct hit.

She glanced back at Riku and Ena.

Thankfully, they didn't seem to be injured.

But, if the fight went on, they would definitely get hurt.

They'd be injured because she couldn't fight effectively.

This wasn't right.

"Rie, if you keep attacking like this, I can't stand by."

Despite her words, she still looked hesitant.

"Then let's fight."

Rie said, channeling mana into her hand.

"Fire Sphere."

A small sphere of fire appeared in Rie's hand.

This was the magic she used during her individual assessment.

It was the magic that triggered a powerful explosion.

Seeing this, Luna tore the scroll in her hand.

Instantly, multiple small fireballs appeared before Luna.

All these fireballs zoomed toward Rie.

Upon seeing this, Rie moved diagonally.

When the attack aimed for her, she tried to dodge.

But, the fireballs didn't fly straight as normal ones would.

As soon as Rie started running diagonally, all the fireballs began to trail her.

'I expected this.'

Rie didn't believe it would be simple, given that it was from a scroll.

When the fireballs trailed Rie, the Sylph behind her dispatched wind blades toward them.

Seeing this, Luna fetched a cube from her pocket.

"Gravity Cube…… Activate."

Like in the assessment, the cube unfolded.

However, it looked slightly different.

Noticing the unfolding cube, Rie bit her lower lip.

'She can't hit me, can she?'

The cube from the assessment.

It was a magical device that accurately aimed and attacked a specific point.

The downside of this device was as definite as its power.

Since it targets a narrow point, it's tough to hit a moving target.

However, the fact that Luna unfolded it meant something had changed.

"When this happens……”

Rie stopped and stood still.

"Hey! Toss me the potion."

At Rie's shout, the student from the Petro family behind her threw a glass bottle her way.

Rie caught it and immediately downed its contents.

"Hmm……”

Inside was a mana amplifier.

It was a potion that accelerated mana movement for a brief period.

Then, the small fireball she'd created earlier started to grow.

Even as it grew, the flame, initially the size of a finger joint, only expanded to a size smaller than a fist.

But, this magic technique was to detonate the compressed flames.

Even a slight increase in size multiplied its power.

"Go."

Then, the magic bolted towards Luna.

Since Sylph was intercepting Luna's fireballs, she couldn't use the move she'd used during the assessment.

Luna frowned upon seeing Rie's magic.

Hitting Rie with the cube was tricky, and if Rie's magic exploded, they would sustain significant damage.

Luna swiftly made a decision and redirected her magic.

"Gravity……!"

Luna triggered the cube.

To prevent herself from being targeted, Rie moved.

Despite such maneuvers, the cube activated in an entirely different spot.

-Kwaah… Kagak!

Intense gravity crushed the Fire Sphere that Rie had thrown.

Since the Fire Sphere wasn't moving at a high speed, its trajectory was somewhat predictable.

Gravity was applied to the spot where it was flying and the moment it entered the gravity effect, it exploded.

The explosion tried to expand, but due to the gravity, all the flames were pushed to the ground.

"Uh……!"

While wielding the cube, Luna let out a small groan.

Rie didn't overlook this instant.

"Sylph!"

Sylph had already neutralized the fireballs Luna had launched and was ready to attack.

"Ah……”

Luna gasped upon seeing Sylph.

If she stops operating the cube now and evades the attack, the flame will scatter.

Its force would be somewhat reduced since the explosion was partially suppressed.

Luna, with her robe, could minimize the damage, but not Ena and Riku behind her.

They would get hurt.

The best decision here would've been to fold the cube and dodge Sylph's attack, but Luna couldn't make that choice.

"Uh……”

Instead, she was prepared to get slightly injured rather than hurt Riku and Ena.

Luna tightly shut her eyes.

Then, a sound arose beside Luna.

"Luna! Don't close your eyes!"

"Huh?"

Suddenly, Riku was rushing towards her.

"Stone Wall!"

As Riku yelled, a wall of stone sprung up from the ground.

It appeared much sturdier than Riku's usual magic.

-Kagak! Kagak!

The wind blades Sylph had unleashed at Luna were stopped by it.

The scratching sound of stone could be heard, but it couldn't penetrate the wall.

"Luna, take this!"

Riku tossed a potion to Luna.

Luna caught the potion.

"Drink it!"

Riku shouted and aimed her hand at Rie.

"Waterball!!"

"Sylph."

The magic flying towards Rie was effortlessly blocked by Sylph.

However, because she had used Sylph to block it, she missed another opportunity to attack Luna.

"Uh……!!!"

Within that fleeting moment, Luna had already downed the potion and discarded the empty bottle onto the ground.

And she exerted more force onto Rie's Fire Sphere.

-Fsss…

Eventually, the flames almost disappeared completely.

"Darn……”

Rie grimaced when she noticed her magic wasn't producing much power.

Seizing this moment, Riku used her magic once more.

"Waterball!"

Visibly irritated, Rie signaled Sylph.

Sylph launched wind blades and shattered the Waterball magic Riku had cast.

"Huh?"

However, it differed from the previous magic.

When the water droplet burst, some liquid spurted out, dousing Rie.

"Uh……”

Rie grimaced at the sudden splash of liquid on her face and wiped it off with her hand.

'Is it a mana-disrupting potion?'

But, no student could have concocted such a potion yet.

Feeling an odd sensation, Rie squirmed.

"What's this… huh? Uh… huh?"

After getting doused with the liquid, Rie sensed something peculiar.

Her body was growing warmer and something felt off.

It was a sensation she hadn't experienced before… something…

Then, Ena, who was standing behind Luna, grinning, appeared.

Ena smiled and began speaking.

"I'm not knowledgeable about making potions that harm people. I'm a good person who only knows how to help others."

"That… what's this? Uh… huh……"

Rie writhed, her body increasingly feeling peculiar and warmer.

"That potion is a love potion~."

"What is…"

Rie's cheeks slowly flushed.

It was a strange sensation.

"Hehe……"

The potion that Ena had told Riku to throw.

It was a potion that amplified desire.

It makes the body burn and induces various desires…

It was a potion she had made, thinking she might use it someday for Luna and Rudy, who were always so frustrating.

"I didn't expect it to be used like this."

Seeing Rie squirming, Ena let out a sly laugh.

CHAPTER 64
JOINT PRACTICAL (5)

A powerful gust of wind slapped against my face.

Locke was sprinting forward with me riding on his back.

"How far are we going?"

"Quit asking and just run."

I realized that walking would only delay us.

So, I decided to ride Locke.

Our goal was simple: reach Evan as fast as we could.

As I'd hoped, Locke kept a swift pace despite my extra weight.

He seemed somewhat strained, but that wasn't important.

All that mattered was our speed.

Suddenly, the distant sounds of conflict reached my ears.

The clash of weapons, shouts of struggle.

I squinted, focusing on the direction of the noise.

There, caught in a beam of light, was a shimmer of silver hair.

Yeniel.

It had to be Yeniel.

Seeing a black-haired man with a sword nearby confirmed it.

It was Evan's group.

I tapped Locke's back, pointing out the sight.

"Look, over there."

"Evan's group."

Locke must have noticed as well since he changed course towards them.

"Listen, from now on, do as I say…”

But Locke had already taken off, running.

"Hey, wait a minute!"

He continued to ignore me, dashing straight into Evan's group.

"You stubborn…”

With a mighty leap, Locke tossed me into the sky.

My body soared upwards, against my will.

This wasn't part of my plan…

I hadn't planned on fighting.

My only aim had been to stop them from meeting Anton Fred.

Of course, confronting Evan's group might have ended up being inevitable.

But a fight wasn't necessary right off the bat.

Evan was the protagonist, a tough opponent.

Judging whether or not I could defeat him was a challenge in itself.

Assessing the enemy's strength before a fight was always the right move.

As I floated in the sky, I glanced downwards.

Only two figures were standing below, Evan and Yeniel.

Weren't they supposed to be three?

Where was the third person?

I dismissed the thought - now wasn't the time.

Evan and Yeniel's eyes widened as Locke and I suddenly descended from the sky.

Taking them by surprise, I cast a spell.

"Abyssal Flame!"

While still airborne, I launched my magic towards Evan, and Locke charged at Yeniel.

Evan seemed surprised but blocked my magic skillfully.

As his sword made contact with my spell, it vanished like dust in the wind.

Simultaneously, Locke and Yeniel locked swords.

Locke tried to overpower Yeniel with sheer force, but Yeniel deflected his attack, shoving him forwards.

She then aimed her sword at Locke's exposed neck.

Locke lurched forward, falling intentionally, and rolled away from Yeniel's range.

Falling from this height would be painful.

Locke might be unscathed, but I wasn't made of the same stuff.

Reacting quickly, I cast a spell.

"Finger of the Demon!"

A black column rose from the ground, catching me mid-air.

As I hung from the pillar, I shouted at Locke.

"Hey! Locke! If you plan an ambush, do it properly! What was that all about?"

"Does it matter? Isn't the point to fight and win?"

Locke responded nonchalantly.

His casual attitude only made me annoyed.

"I'm beginning to question why I even brought you along."

Evan and Yeniel, suddenly thrust into a skirmish, stared at us, baffled.

"Rudy Astria, were you aiming for us?"

Evan questioned, eyes locked on me.

Well, what's done was done.

'Isn't it enough to fight and win?'

I gave Evan a mischievous smirk.

"Come on, let's go, top seat."

Mana surged into my hand as I prepared for the battle.

-

Meanwhile, Rie, cheeks flushed, was dodging Luna and Riku's relentless assaults.

Seeing her desperately clinging onto her skirt was heartbreaking.

Her eyes welled up with tears, her cheeks ablaze with redness.

"Please… the… antidote…”

Rie stammered out.

Her words left the Petro family's son clueless.

"I… I don't know anything about this potion… I've never heard of it…"

Rie whimpered in response, her face showing clear signs of tears.

Luna and the others were at a loss.

They were in a battle, yes, but attacking her in this state felt… like they were crossing a line.

Suddenly, a potion soared in from behind Rie.

"Um… here, take this!"

"If you had it… why didn't you give it sooner?"

Rie managed to mutter, trying to hold back her tears.

She immediately guzzled down the potion as she received it.

"After hearing…"

Petro started, but was cut short by Rie's scowl.

"What is it?"

"It temporarily suppresses the effects of poison or drugs in the body, but they return stronger later," he explained.

Rie flashed a wry smile at this revelation.

"Well, in that case, it doesn't matter. I just have to wrap this up before then."

Despite her words, she was still under the influence of the potion.

Her cheeks retained their flush.

But now, she was at least capable of focusing.

"Luna, let's have a proper fight now," Rie announced.

Luna was taken aback.

She had thought they had been fighting seriously up until this point.

Despite being in an abnormal state, Rie had been successfully blocking all incoming attacks with Sylph.

With a dexterity that was hard to match, she managed to evade most of the attacks by artfully maneuvering her body and casting Sylph to block any critical attacks.

Luna's hand slid into her bag, counting the remaining scrolls.

Around ten were left, though only a handful of them would serve as effective attacks against Rie.

Luna fingered the cube in her pocket, its warmth still lingering from prior use.

She needed time before she could use it again.

It would've been a good move to use it when Rie was in a weakened state, but that window had slipped away.

Luna didn't dwell on it.

As Rie readied another spell, Luna's hand tightened around the cube.

It would be ready for one last use soon.

With Rie's clear intention to wrap up the battle quickly, Luna had to consider this the final deployment of the cube.

Should she target Rie or counter Rie's attack with it?

Despite such considerations, Luna reached a conclusion - it had to be used offensively.

"Riku, Ena. Don't focus on blocking Rie's attacks, instead impede her movements."

"Understood…!"

"Yes!"

Luna extracted two scrolls from her bag.

With a swift motion, Luna ripped both scrolls simultaneously.

A fireball materialized and surged towards Rie, just like before.

'The same attack as before…?'

Rie momentarily questioned the tactic, but she quickly dismissed the thought.

Two scrolls were torn, one was a fireball attack, the other unknown.

Rie smirked.

"Fire Sphere."

A flame sprouted from Rie's palm.

Despite the incoming fireball, she held her ground.

"Sylph."

As Rie began to assemble wind from Sylph, Luna was momentarily perplexed.

She wasn't moving, even as the fireball reached dangerously close.

The sound of another scroll being torn echoed in the field.

But Rie was busy with her own spellcasting.

The sound originated from somewhere else, most likely from her teammate who had been hiding behind her.

"I can use scrolls too."

Scrolls might be the creation of wizards, but usage wasn't exclusive to them.

A forceful jet of water collided with the fireball mid-air, smothering it completely.

Water-based magic was not Rie's forte.

Among fundamental magic, she excelled in harnessing the attributes of wind and fire.

With intermediate magic, she also largely leaned towards fire.

The notion of them countering with magic of a different attribute hadn't crossed their minds.

The tiny flame in Rie's hand darted towards Sylph's mouth.

Luna's body sprung into action instinctively.

If she was to take the full brunt of Rie's attack, it would spell disaster.

Riku and Ena too would be caught in its path.

Whirling the bag from her back to the front, Luna yanked out her spellbook.

All fears, anxieties, and stray thoughts were shoved aside.

Her sole focus now was to safeguard Riku and Ena.

"Sylph……" Rie whispered.

Luna furiously flipped through the pages of her spellbook.

Where was it?

Where… where.

Even though Luna hadn't used this spellbook, she had skimmed through its content.

There was certainly a spell hidden within its pages that could deflect this.

"Shoot!!!"

Rie's voice rang out just as Luna stumbled upon the desired spell.

Her finger brushed against the page.

"Ugh…!"

Luna grunted as a light burst forth from the book.

Mana drained from Luna's body, the spell taking effect.

"Fortify!"

An ethereal radiance enveloped Luna, Ena, and Riku.

The spell that was once used on the scarecrow.

A spell that fortified the body.

It essentially granted resistance against all impacts.

"Ah!!!!" Luna gasped as Rie's magic neared and detonated right before her.

Despite the fortification spell, Luna could feel a scorching sensation searing through her.

"Grrraaaah!!!!!" she roared.

"Luna!!!!"

Yet Luna didn't stop.

"This… is nothing……”

She managed to say through gritted teeth.

Her body screamed in pain, but she pushed through.

Rie, who had been watching, furrowed her brows.

It wasn't pleasant seeing Luna in pain, but if things went wrong, one of the teaching

assistants would step in to save her.

Then, a clinking sound echoed from behind.

"Huh?" Rie glanced back.

It was Luna's cube.

"Ah……”

Rie realized what one of the scrolls Luna had used was.

It was a spell of invisibility.

Luna had concealed the cube using the invisibility spell and had released it alongside the fireball.

She had used the spell where the cube had been, rendering the need to pinpoint coordinates for the cube's magic.

Rie was taken aback.

The potion concealed in the water ball earlier, and now the cube, hidden and sent within the fireball.

"I got tricked the same way twice."

If you're fooled twice by the same trick…

As this thought crossed Rie's mind, she felt an odd sensation beneath her feet.

"Sylph!!!!"

she cried out in alarm.

Suddenly, gravity collapsed on Rie.

CHAPTER 65
JOINT PRACTICAL (6)

"Panting…”

"Huff… puff…”

Luna and Rie's labored breaths echoed in the forest.

Both were a sight, roughed up and on their last legs.

Rie had endured a strong blow from Luna's cube.

Naturally, she had done all she could to hold off with Sylph.

Guardian Spirit.

It's a trick where the elemental infuses itself into the elementalist, shielding them from harm.

It's the strongest defense an elementalist has.

Still, even this could only hold up for so long.

Sylph took a major blow and was consequently sent back.

Luna had just about survived Rie's attack with the fortify spell.

She was still a rookie with her spellbook and had failed in controlling her mana efficiently.

But, the battle was far from over.

Shaking, Luna tried to pull out a scroll from her belt.

"Up, Wind Cutter…!"

Rie attempted to stop her with magic.

"Ah…!"

Luna tried to fend off the attack with her robe, but it was already in tatters.

"Ugh…"

It failed to stop Rie's magic, and Luna took a direct hit in her stomach.

"Uh…"

Seeing this, Rie winced.

Even though she wasn't on the receiving end, Luna's pained expression stirred something unpleasant in her.

"Luna…!"

Suddenly, Riku dashed forward.

"Waterball!"

Rie tried to evade the magic.

However, her body was feeble, and she could only dodge clumsily, almost tripping.

"Ugh!"

Rie dropped to the ground to dodge the attack.

That's when Petro came running from behind.

"Rie! A potion…!"

"Ugh…"

Without a second's delay, Rie pressed the potion Petro handed her to her lips.

"Luna! Potion!"

Ena quickly sprinted over, trying to offer Luna a potion.

"Fire Arrow!"

Even while drinking the potion, Rie promptly cast her magic.

"Wha! Stone Wall!"

However, Riku was quick and blocked the magic.

"Ugh…”

"Huff…!"

They both downed the potion, but their conditions weren't equal.

While Rie rose, Luna couldn't even prop herself up.

Luna's injuries were graver than Rie's, and she had burned through more mana.

Even if they were both healing, their recovery rates wouldn't match.

"Fire s…”

Rie, without even rising to her feet, attempted to cast her magic.

The most powerful magic she could use.

She planned to end the match in one swift blow.

That's when it happened.

"That's enough."

Out of nowhere, a hand clamped down on Rie's wrist.

"The match is over. Luna has lost. I won't allow any more fighting."

It was a teaching assistant.

The teaching assistant, who was also the match referee, stepped in and stopped Rie.

"Sigh…"

Hearing these words, Rie sighed.

And she staggered towards Luna.

Rie was on the edge of crying.

"Luna… I'm sorry…"

Standing in front of Luna, Rie apologized.

At the same time, Luna's eyes welled up too.

She bit her lip and sat down where she was.

Then, she turned her gaze towards Rie.

As she looked at Rie, Luna's lips tightened.

Rie was nervous.

She was worried that their friendship would suffer because of this.

Seeing Rie's worried face, Luna shook her head.

Then she wiped away the tears pooling in her eyes.

With a weak smile and a note of determination in her voice, Luna declared.

"Next time… I won't lose next time…!"

As Luna uttered these words, relief washed over Rie's face.

Luna instead challenged her for a future match.

She declared her intent to win if they were to fight again…

Just as Rie had done herself after losing in the individual assessment.

For Rie, it felt like a worthy rival had emerged.

Just like soil hardening after rainfall, she felt a new bond forming between Luna and herself.

Rie extended her hand to Luna.

"I'll win next time too."

As Rie said this with a smile, Luna returned a weak smile.

Then Luna tried to rise, accepting the hand Rie offered.

"Kyack…”

When Luna grabbed her hand, Rie let out a strange whimper.

An odd sound…

The noise signaled the potion's effect kicking in, and the delayed-effect drug had fully run its course.

Actually, Rie's body had started to heat up earlier, but her survival instinct had been stronger than her desire, so it had been somewhat suppressed.

However, as the tension eased, the effects of the potion began to resurface.

"Uh…”

Rie started to look around at the others.

"I’m… not that kind of person…”

Tears brimmed in Rie's eyes.

"Can I get an antidote…”

"Ah, here it is…”

Reacting to Rie's desperate plea, Ena began to dig through her bag.

"You can't."

But, the teaching assistant blocked her action.

"Luna's already been disqualified. You can't interfere with the practical."

"H… what?"

Rie stared at the teaching assistant, more shocked than when the cube had sprung open beneath her.

"Please. I…"

Rie pleaded with the teaching assistant, desperation written across her face.

The teaching assistant then posed a question to Rie.

"Then, are you willing to forfeit?"

"Uh…"

That was out of the question.

She had just defeated Luna's team.

How could she forfeit now?

"Uh… Ugh…"

All Rie could do was stand there, tears filling her eyes.

"That… I'm sorry."

Ena scratched her head.

-

Someone had been observing the entire situation from the start.

"Hmm…”

Those hidden amidst the trees, observing the duel between Luna and Rie, belonged to Anton Fred's team.

Anton concealed his large frame behind a tree, watching the fight unfold.

Noting Rie's staggering figure, his teammate turned to him.

"Anton! What's our move? Princess Rie seems in poor condition. Should we strike?"

Ignoring his teammate's question, Anton found himself deep in thought.

An idea tickled the edges of his mind, elusive and evasive…

Anton murmured under his breath.

"Where have I… seen this before?"

Luna's spellbook.

The strong, radiant light of magic bursting forth from the book.

Casting magic through a book…

"Where did I come across this…”

"Anton!"

"Huh, yes?"

Anton snapped out of his reverie as his teammate tugged at his clothes.

"We should seize this chance to attack Princess Rie! After such an intense battle, she's…”

Anton studied Rie.

She was visibly tired, but something didn't quite add up.

Anton spoke up.

"We retreat."

"What? This is our chance…"

"No!"

Anton smacked his round belly for emphasis.

"We're dealing with Princess Rie here. That Princess Rie."

"Yes…"

"Do you honestly believe Princess Rie would leave herself so vulnerable?"

Anton's teammate glanced between Rie and Anton.

"It's a trap!"

"Huh?"

"She's feigning weakness to lower our guard! There's no way Princess Rie would be this distressed after a fight with a nobody from a no-name family!"

Anton's teammate gave a sheepish smile.

Luna Railer, who was Rie's opponent, is a top-tier student at the academy.

Even for someone as formidable as Princess Rie, defeating Luna would not have been an easy feat.

Looking at Rie's expression, it wasn't a pretense.

She genuinely seemed exhausted.

However, for the time being, his teammate decided to trust Anton's instincts.

"Ah, as expected, it's Anton!"

"Hmm hmm!"

Anton heaved his body into motion.

"Let's move on."

"Right…"

His teammate fell in step behind him.

As they went elsewhere, Anton continued to murmur to himself.

"Where did I see it…"

-

"Damn it."

I swiftly sidestepped Evan's sword.

Even a mere graze from it could be lethal… or more precisely, it could cause my mana to fluctuate.

That wouldn't just result in critical injury; it would be defeat.

"Huff!"

"Finger of the Demon!"

I cast my spell just as Evan's sword seemed poised to strike me.

In response, Evan retracted his blade, evading my magic.

"Ah, I didn't expect it to be this tough."

In the game, as I experienced it from Evan's perspective, I failed to understand how formidable that ability was.

After all, his sword only needs to make contact with the magic to nullify it.

I had considered it somewhat flawed.

But now, I understood the difficulty in targeting the body.

If magic so much as grazed the sword, it would disintegrate like dust.

Why did such an overpowering ability exist…?

Evan persistently lunged at me with his blade.

The classic strategy of a swordsman against a wizard.

Forcing close-quarters combat was the most effective approach.

Evan raised his sword to strike once more.

I smirked knowingly.

"Why play the swordsman when you're truly a wizard?"

I continued casting spells while maintaining distance.

So, Evan relentlessly tried to bridge the gap.

His aggressive forward push was bound to create an opening.

Rather than dodging outwards, I stepped into Evan's inner circle.

Evan's eyes widened at my manoeuvre.

I channelled mana into my clenched fist.

"Huh…”

While swiveling my body to the left, I aimed a right punch at Evan's flank.

-Boom!!!

"Huh!"

My fist connected with Evan's side.

A resonating thud echoed from Evan's flank as he was hurled sideways into a tree.

"Kuh!"

"I'm closer to a swordsman than you'll ever be."

Evan might have trained his physique and handled a sword, but at his core, he was a wizard.

On the other hand, I'd adopted the discipline of a swordsman to master the techniques imparted by Borval.

That was a different level compared to an amateur in swordplay.

Hence, I held the upper hand in agility and bodily coordination.

"Ugh…"

Evan hauled himself up, nursing his side where my punch had made its impact.

Despite the powerful blow, he managed to get back up.

It felt like his ribs had given way…

"I feel like the antagonist now…"

The antagonist who strikes at the hero, and the hero who overcomes it.

Thinking that this was inside a game made me a little more anxious.

Evan stood upright, leveling his sword at me.

"I won't be defeated…"

I scowled at the sight.

"Awakening events are not welcome…"

Evan started accumulating mana in his free hand, the one devoid of the sword.

Simultaneously, the surrounding trees began to rustle.

Evan's unique mid-tier magic.

A spell that manipulated the environment, animals or plants.

Eco-magic.

The trunks of the trees started to shift, homing in on me.

"Ugh…!"

I maneuvered my body to evade the animated plants.

The plant stems were swift, albeit lacking flexibility.

Their movements overlapped, twisting around each other.

However, that wasn't the problem.

"Huff!"

Once again, Evan brandished his sword and charged at me.

The plants and Evan.

Avoiding both seemed impossible.

I amassed mana in my fist.

Crack.

As I snapped the incoming plant stems with my fist, I dodged Evan's blade, contorting my body.

As I continued to channel mana into my fist to deflect the plants, the energy consumption was immense.

At this pace, I'd deplete my reserves before Evan.

I began hunting for an opening in Evan's defenses again.

I'd landed a hit once before; there was no reason I couldn't do it again.

With narrowed eyes, I scrutinized Evan.

Evan steadied his sword, aiming for my shoulder.

A big move.

I didn't miss this gap and put power into my fist.

Taking a hit to the shoulder to deliver a significant blow to Evan seemed a worthy trade.

Sacrifice flesh to gain bone……

It was at that moment I clenched my fist and lunged.

I felt something snagging my ankle as I propelled forward.

"Ah…"

A tree root emerged, expertly tripping me up.

Seeing this, Evan flashed a triumphant grin.

That's when I realized that Evan had intentionally created this opening.

Regardless of my training, my body remained that of a wizard.

A regular human body.

So, with my ankle already ensnared by the tree root, I was unable to make any additional maneuvers.

Had I known, I could have infused my foot with mana and snapped the root on my way, but my body was already tumbling forward.

"Damn it…”

My ankle was tangled in the root, pitching me forward.

And Evan's blade swooped towards my shoulder.

In that split-second, I made a rapid decision.

"Priscilla!!!"

CHAPTER 66
JOINT PRACTICAL (7)

-Clang! Clang!

Yeniel and Locke crossed swords from afar.

They kept fighting, gradually moving further away from where Evan and Rudy were locked in their own battle.

"Your attacks are too straightforward, aren't they?"

Yeniel taunted as she blocked Locke's sword.

Locke's sword was simple.

It stabbed when it said it would, and it swung where it said it would.

That made it easy to dodge.

But, these straightforward attacks left no big openings.

It was easy enough to evade Locke's attacks, but finding a chance for a counterattack was impossible.

So, Yeniel decided to act calm and provoke him.

"Do you really think you can keep this up?"

Yeniel dodged Locke's sword and spoke.

"You saw Evan's skills during the evaluation, right? As a swordsman, shouldn't you have fought him instead?"

Even with these provocations, Locke just kept pressuring Yeniel silently.

"If we keep fighting like this, Evan will come to help—"

"Enough."

Locke slashed his sword with force.

Taken aback by Locke's sudden attack, Yeniel quickly retreated out of Locke's range.

'Did it work?'

Yeniel thought for a moment, then shook her head.

Locke's expression was still neutral.

As they put more distance between them, Locke pointed his sword at Yeniel.

"I made my choice. It's not too late to regret it when that guy actually loses."

Locke got into position again.

"Rudy Astria is strong."

Yeniel frowned at those words.

"I heard you two didn't get along? You seem to know more than I thought."

"That's right. That's why I know. I often study Rudy Astria."

Yeniel looked disgusted.

"What are you, a stalker? Into guys, are you?"

Locke, who had been nonchalant all along, showed anger at these words.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not doing this because I enjoy it."

But his anger, too, faded quickly.

"I'm just keeping tabs on him."

At Locke's words, Yeniel grimaced.

'This guy doesn't seem to be shaken by anything.'

Thinking so, Yeniel gripped her sword tightly.

She decided she had to get serious.

Best to meet the straightforward with straightforward.

If she tried any weird strategies, she might just hurt herself.

"Alright then…"

Yeniel took a deep breath and prepared to charge at Locke.

"Everyone!! Fire!!!"

Just when she fully prepared herself, she heard an unusual noise.

A mix of magic and shouting.

Suddenly, magic surged out from between the trees.

"Haah!"

Locke and Yeniel swiftly dodged.

It wasn't just a single spell.

The attack came from a group of three, not just one person.

Locke and Yeniel sprinted to take cover behind a large tree.

-Boom! Bang!

"What are they up to?"

"It isn't strong. Seems like the weaker ones have teamed up."

At Locke's words, Yeniel nodded.

She'd anticipated this.

Weaker teams struggled to get high rankings on their own, so they often grouped together.

A tactic of the weak.

Yeniel flashed a thin smile and proposed to Locke.

"Should we join forces for a bit?"

Locke eyed Yeniel skeptically.

Yeniel pointed her sword at Locke and said,

"Do you want to keep fighting?"

Locke thought for a moment and observed the enemies.

Only a few of them had shown themselves.

About five were visible.

But there would be more.

Maybe two teams, or even three……

Locke turned to Yeniel and agreed.

"A temporary alliance."

Yeniel chuckled softly and dashed into the crowd.

-

When I called Priscilla's name, a silver-furred wolf appeared behind me.

Priscilla formed icicles and aimed at Evan.

Caught off guard, Evan stopped his sword mid-strike.

And in that moment, Priscilla rushed to me and pushed me aside with force.

"Cough!"

I was thrown to the ground by Priscilla's enormous body.

Evan shifted his grip on his sword, focusing on deflecting the icicles.

Many icicles flew, but none could stand against Evan's sword.

They crumbled to dust and vanished.

I hadn't wanted to summon Priscilla…

Priscilla is a powerful yet dangerous force that exceeds my abilities.

Just summoning her drains a lot of mana, and it chips away at my mental strength too.

"Gasp……”

Feeling my mana rapidly depleting, I gasped.

But I couldn't send her back now.

Since I already used some many in summoning her, I had to make use of Priscilla.

"Priscilla! Keep him under pressure!"

Biting my lip, I forced myself to stand.

I channeled mana into my fist and charged forward.

Evan was pelted with icicles, and I dove into the fray.

I swung my fist.

I threw several punches, but each narrowly missed.

The icicles, however, managed to land minor hits on Evan.

These minor wounds weren't significant, but the fact that Evan was on the defensive was a good thing.

I kept swinging my fist.

Evan dodged as best he could, my fist kept slicing through the air.

I maintained constant pressure on Evan, not allowing him a moment's respite.

My breath became ragged.

My mana was depleting.

A creeping dizziness began to cloud my senses.

When I focused my senses, Evan came into view.

Evan, also struggling for breath.

He was suffering as much as I was.

I wasn't done yet.

"Spikes of Hell!"

I channelled my remaining focus, infusing dark magic into my fist.

"Arghh!!"

Evan was suddenly jabbed in the side by an emerging spike.

He'd been unable to keep track of my magic while focusing on my fist and Priscilla' attacks.

I smirked.

"Got you right there. You little bastard."

Both Priscilla's and my direct attacks are strong.

Evan knew this.

So, he decided to bear the hit of my dark magic while dodging the other attacks.

However, this was a poor decision on Evan's part.

Dark magic doesn't just inflict pain upon the enemy.

It possesses other effects.

Just as the Abyssal Flame has the capacity to inflict excruciating pain, there's another ability nestled within it.

That was its true power.

As Evan was pricked by the thorn, his movements stopped.

The ability contained within Spikes of Hell was immobilization.

The power to stop the opponent's movements.

It didn't last long, but it offered ample time to land a powerful strike on Evan.

"Haaah!"

I pulled back my right fist to the full.

And charged it with mana.

I unsummoned Priscilla, and the mana previously used to sustain her was channelled into my fist.

"This fist carries the sorrow of being second."

Sure, I chose that second seat, but it came with its share of sorrow.

I also want to be first, to be the protagonist.

I didn't want to be second forever.

But, the protagonist's responsibility was heavy.

Although I've been helping people till now, I've been doing so with a self-defense mechanism.

If I can't save this person, it's not my fault.

It's Evan's responsibility, it is Evan that made a mistake. I am not the one at fault.

I didn't want the responsibility, but I also didn't want to give up.

So, I used Evan in that way.

But every time I harbored such thoughts, I felt frustrated.

How great it would have been if I had reincarnated as Evan, not 'Rudy Astria'.

If I had been the protagonist…

If I had Evan's abilities…

But such thoughts were useless.

Because I'm already Rudy Astria.

The opportunity to land a punch on Evan…

There aren't many such opportunities.

If Evan progresses further, I might not stand a chance, and we might not ever again find ourselves in a fight like this.

This could be the last time.

So, I'm about to release everything I have pent-up on you.

As much as I've helped the story, take a hit for not progressing it like you should be.

-Kwaaaaaaang!!!!!!!!!

"Arghh!!!"

I landed my fist squarely into Evan's gut.

Evan was propelled into the air, hurling far away.

It was only after colliding with a distant tree that he plummeted to the ground.

"Haa…"

A wave of dizziness washed over me due to the abrupt expenditure of a massive amount of mana.

I held my throbbing head and sunk down to the ground.

"Uh……"

I immediately lifted my gaze to Evan.

He was unconscious, his eyes rolled back.

Seeing this stirred a sense of exhilaration within me.

"Haha……"

I chuckled.

That's the punch of the second seat… you brat…

I tried to get up from the ground.

But suddenly, my legs gave way, and I found myself back on my knees.

"Uh……"

My head pounded painfully.

It was the backlash of summoning Priscilla.

Having recklessly used dark magic and Priscilla, my mental energy was severely drained.

I shot Evan a fleeting glance.

Evan's gem.

I could take his gem and add it to mine to steal his points, but I didn't.

Because Evan had to be on top…

Even though I won now, there was no guarantee that I would be stronger later.

There are things that I can do and things that only Evan can do.

Evan hadn't been particularly helpful so far, but I hope that one day he would.

Even though he was unconscious, I addressed him as if issuing a warning.

"I'm giving you a chance."

So far, I have not interfered with any opportunities that Evan could have.

I was giving all the elements that could make Evan stronger to him.

But I wouldn't stand idly by if Evan only grew stronger without contributing to the story.

"Grow stronger, Evan."

I spat out those words and concealed my presence.

-

A shrill noise reverberated throughout the mountains.

Then, the teaching assistants called a stop to all the participants locked in combat.

-The joint practical of the first and second years has now concluded.

With that, it came to an end.

Professor Cromwell monitored the score situation from the mountain's entrance.

[

Rie Von Ristonia

Evan

Borval

……

]

Evan beat Rudy Astria.

Professor Cromwell wanted to cheer like a child, but he held back his emotions.

"Hmm, hmm……”

With a smirk, Professor Cromwell guided the students emerging from the entrance.

CHAPTER 67
JOINT PRACTICAL (8)

The sun was setting on the mountain, turning the world dark.

Students, their faces bathed in relief, began to make their way off the mountain.

They were the ones who had survived the day, not falling to elimination.

To them, just enduring till the end felt like a victory.

Some bore low scores, but the joy of surviving outshone their disappointment.

Their faces were lit with smiles as they descended, all except for one individual, who limped painfully down the trail.

"Ugh…”

That person was Rie, her condition deteriorating by the minute.

"Luna… Where's Luna…”

Staggering, Rie scanned the area for Luna, or rather Ena, who should have been by her side.

But Luna's group had already made their way back to the academy, far from the practice field.

"Uh… Ugh…”

The sight of the usually composed and confident Rie, now in a pitiful state, drew the attention of her fellow students.

One male student hesitantly approached her.

"Are… you okay?"

"Get lost…”

"What?"

"I said, get lost…”

Rie spat out the words with a scowl.

Even if Rie was overflowing with lust right now, she hadn't lost her mind.

It's just that she dealt with things that she would normally deal with softly in a rather sharp manner.

As Rie stumbled onward, she ran into the last person she wanted to encounter.

"Oh, Rie. You made it through."

Rudy greeted Rie with happily, but seeing him appear out of the blue, Rie couldn't help but scream.

"No… Don't come! Don't come! Don't come!"

Rudy watched her outburst, his face etched in confusion.

Meanwhile, Rie's mind started racing.

'Why is he here!'

As her thoughts whirled, her physical condition took a turn for the worse.

Her body heated up at Rudy's sight, making it hard for her to even control her expressions.

Doing her best to avoid Rudy's gaze, she stole a quick glance at him, only to find his face inching closer.

"Don't, don't come!"

"You… approached me."

Rudy's statement, laced with confusion, made Rie assess her position.

'Did I… move?'

Realization dawned on her.

She had unknowingly drawn closer to Rudy.

She was losing control over her body, her legs taking her right up to Rudy.

"Huh?"

Her mind stopped racing and just gave up on thinking.

She just moved on instinct.

"Hey, hey! What… What's happening!"

"Uh…!"

Ignoring Rudy's startled yelps, she wrapped her arms tightly around his body.

"Hehehe…”

Her face buried in his body, she laughed goofily.

"You've gotten a lot stronger…”

Her hands explored Rudy's body as she held on to him.

"Hey! Have you lost it? You, hey! Hey!"

Rie's hands roamed across Rudy's back, stomach, and even his chest.

"Hehehe……”

'Rudy, Rudy, Rudy.'

Rudy's name echoed continuously in Rie's mind.

Having examined Rudy's body thoroughly, Rie tilted her head up.

She was met with Rudy's face.

"Hehehe… Nice blond hair, just like mine…”

"Hey!!!"

Rie reached out, her fingers entwining with Rudy's hair.

Then she saw Rudy's lips…

She slightly closed her eyes and was about to stand on her tiptoes.

"Enough."

Suddenly, Rie felt someone grabbing the back of her head and pulling her away.

"Huh? What… Who… Who is this…”

She spun around, her eyes meeting the person who'd intervened.

"Ah… Astina…!!"

Astina was holding her as she thrashed around.

"Rudy!!! Rudy!!! Help me!!!"

Calling out Rudy's name, Rie writhed in Astina's grasp.

Astina let out a sigh and glanced at Rie.

"How much will you regret this when you recover…”

"Rudy…! Help me…!"

Rie's plea was like a kitten mewling for its mother's aid.

Rudy was left unsure, not knowing how to react to Rie's behavior.

Should he intervene since Rie was asking for help, or should he trust Astina who was the one holding her back?

"She's not in her right mind because of some odd medicine. You shouldn't worry."

"Oh… okay."

With Astina's words, Rudy awkwardly nodded, a strained smile on his face.

Meanwhile, Rie whimpered in a heartbreaking tone, tears pooling in her eyes.

"Rudy…!!"

Rie was led away by Astina, her sobs trailing behind them.

Exhaling in relief, Astina muttered to herself.

"That was a close call."

-

The next day.

"Uh… my head……"

Rie groggily sat up in bed.

Her head was throbbing with pain.

"Huh… Rie, are you awake?"

"Who…?"

Rie turned to the source of the voice, a familiar face greeted her.

"Ena?"

A woman with a comforting smile was seated by her side.

It was Ena.

"How do you feel?"

Ena extended a warm cup of tea towards Rie.

"Huh? Well… my head's a bit sore, but other than that, I think I'm alright…"

Rie accepted the tea, her face etched with confusion.

"I'm sorry about yesterday… I didn't realize the potion would affect you so intensely."

Ena offered her apologies to Rie.

"No, it's okay, considering the circumstances…"

Rie brushed off the apology with a casual wave of her hand.

Her mind soon wandered off.

She mulled over what attitude she should take.

She was the one who had defeated Luna.

It'd be dumb to assume Ena held only goodwill towards her.

Moreover, her interactions with Ena were minimal compared to Luna.

She had only seen Ena and Luna talk from a distance.

So, what attitude should she take?

Rie always wore a mask.

She had dropped that guise long ago around Rudy and Locke, and even to Luna, she had shown a glimpse of her true self.

But she was wondering whether she could show herself to Ena or to keep their relationship strictly professional.

While Rie was lost in her thoughts, Ena gingerly spoke up.

"Do you… remember what happened yesterday?"

“…Yesterday?"

Rie tilted her head.

Yesterday…

She remembered everything up until the announcement of the joint practical's completion.

And… how she frantically searched for Ena while descending from the mountain.

People tried to approach her, and she became irritable…

Irritable?

Now that she thought about it, she was perpetually irritable…

"Ah…!"

A certain 'incident' suddenly flashed into Rie's memory.

She had rushed into Rudy's arms the moment she spotted him… and…

"Ah…! Ah!!! Ahhhhhhh!!!"

The sheer embarrassment caused Rie to clutch her head, screaming.

Her face flushed beet-red, she was at a loss for what to do next.

"I, I, I've lost my mind…!!!"

As Rie spiraled into panic, Ena soothingly patted her back.

"No… I'm sorry… I felt terrible the moment I found out…”

Ena continued, squeezing Rie's hand sympathetically.

"I'm truly sorry… You could have been attracted to someone else in the academy, yet

you ended up in the arms of someone you're not particularly fond of…”

At Ena's words, Rie was taken aback.

"Uh…”

Disagreeing would create issues, as would agreeing.

Rie was somewhat aware of her feelings for Rudy, though she was reluctant to acknowledge them.

But, she didn't want to confess these feelings yet.

If Rudy were to express his feelings for her, she thought she might consider it.

However, to confess first… Rie's pride wouldn't permit it.

"Umm…”

Rie merely pouted, not replying to Ena's statement.

She was adamant about keeping her feelings a secret, not just from Rudy but from everyone.

However…

'Huh?'

Ena noticed something strange in Rie's reaction.

The awkwardness she felt was because she didn't know Rie very well.

Rie always appeared confident and natural in front of others.

This awkward side of Rie was something Ena wasn't used to, and it made her uneasy.

Ena cautiously spoke up again.

"You're a princess… You'll have numerous responsibilities, including marriage and other matters… You'll have to be very mindful of them."

"That… is true?"

"Then I'll tell Rudy. Rie will never!!! never!!! have such feelings, so don't misunderstand. And I'll tell him to stop the other kids from spreading strange rumors."

"No, no, no!"

Rie hastily waved her hands, flustered at Ena's suggestion.

"Huh? Why?"

Ena looked at Rie, her expression innocent.

"That… If you say that, wouldn't Rudy feel embarrassed? No… why would Rudy be embarra… no, that…"

Though Rie didn't want to confess her feelings to Rudy, she was curious if he might have similar feelings for her.

A subtle desire to see Rudy's reaction to this started to seep in.

However, if she told him that outright, wouldn't she be shutting the door on any potential development with Rudy?

With Rie's gaze darting around in disarray, Ena flashed a knowing smile and threw out a question.

"So? What are you trying to say?"

Rie blushed at her words.

"Huh? That's right! Oh! You're right! I'll tell you! It was my mistake and I should explain and apologize myself! I'm not a kid!"

She latched onto that question like a drowning person clutching at a lifeline.

However, that lifeline was nothing more than bait on Ena's fishing line……

'This is a serious matter… '

Ena rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

Until now, Rudy had been consistently overlooked at the academy.

Everyone turned a blind eye to Rudy, dismissing him with scorn.

Except Luna.

She admired Rudy, respected him, even adored him.

Ena assumed Luna was the only one who felt this way.

No one had challenged that assumption until now.

However, seeing the situation at hand, Luna wasn't alone.

The first princess of the empire!

The heir!

That person likes Rudy.

'Since when… '

Ena racked her brains, but the answer eluded her.

The students of the academy, and others, were unware of the dynamics within the school.

Everyone believed that it was Astina who had come to Rie's rescue.

No one could have imagined that Rudy was the true hero behind the scenes.

'How to handle this… '

Indeed, the usual authoritative image of Rie, who appeared to rule over everyone, was absent.

Only the shy countenance of a smitten girl was on display.

If Rie intended to exploit Rudy for political gains, it might have been okay.

Judging from Rudy's behavior so far, he seemed immune to such manipulations.

However, the affection of a bashful girl was not something Rudy would easily overlook.

'Luna… We have a serious issue on our hands… '

Thinking of Luna, Ena sighed and changed her expression.

First, she needed to get out of here.

"Then, I should get going! I've already administered the antidote and other medications, so you should recover quickly! Let me know if anything changes."

"Uh… yes! Thank you!"

Rie exhaled in relief, watching Ena depart.

"A tough kid to deal with…"

If it had been a discussion about work or politics, she wouldn't have felt so flustered.

Yet, having Rudy involved had left her flustered.

"Ugh…"

Rie then curled up, gripping her stomach.

"Warm…"

And she remembered the time she was in Rudy's arms.

"……hehehe."

Rie's expression softened, replaced by a foolish smile that no one had ever seen before.

CHAPTER 68
RESPONSIBILITY (1)

Cromwell's Lab.

"So, I've won the bet since Evan technically won."

Cromwell declared his victory, but his face was far from happy.

In contrast, it was Robert who sported a grin and started talking.

"It must be nice to get out of guard duty."

Robert teased Cromwell, humming a playful tune.

Even though Cromwell was the victor, it was Robert who mocked him.

That was because he'd heard the full story about the incident from the teaching assistant.

The clash between Evan and Rudy.

More than a couple of teaching assistants had watched this fight.

They were ready for any issues, knowing it was a battle between reputedly strong students.

As the teaching assistants anticipated, it was a fierce battle.

Their fight resulted in damage to the surrounding trees and landscape.

At the fight's end, Rudy landed the final hit, sending Evan flying far away.

The teaching assistants were on high alert, ready to intervene even in the final moments.

Usually, students at the end are so thrilled that they often launch a huge attack, even when the opponent can no longer fight back.

They were prepared to stop the fight if Rudy tried to attack Evan further, but what Rudy did next was unexpected.

He didn't just refrain from attacking; he didn't even take the gem from Evan.

The teaching assistants were puzzled and reported it to Cromwell.

And now.

The bet had started over 'who has a better eye for students' and 'who has trained their students better'.

But they couldn't outright order the students to fight each other.

So they wagered on the scores.

Even if Rudy had directly fought with Evan and won, it was fine to lose the bet.

Scores weren't important.

They just wanted to prove that their judgment was correct.

"Wow~ Professor Cromwell sure knows how to pick students who score well."

Robert didn't dispute when knowing the reason for the bet.

He simply accepted his loss cheerfully and shrugged it off.

Robert was happy just proving he had taught Rudy well and that his judgment wasn't off.

"Whoever taught Rudy has trained him well in combat. Hahahaha!"

Robert exited Cromwell's lab, his laughter filling the air.

"Hmm……”

Cromwell watched Robert leave, a frown on his face.

"The top first-year student this year is Rudy Astria, right?"

Cromwell had chosen Evan after much consideration.

After all, he was the one who kept taking the Top Seat among the first years.

He had bet on Evan's potential.

However, the highest-ranking first-year student this year was unusual.

Despite consistently scoring top grades, he didn't draw attention.

The professors' focus was on different students.

McGuire, Robert, and the other professors all focused on one unusual student.

"He seems pretty capable…"

Nobody doubted Evan's superior skills.

Yet, if asked whether they could mentor him well, they would shake their heads.

The method Evan used in his individual assessment.

None of the professors knew such a technique.

Given the professors' abilities, it was far more effective to overpower than to use such a method.

"Will this be a curse… or a blessing…"

Evan's unusualness was an advantage, but the absence of any mentorship was a significant drawback.

He had to chart his own path, without help.

Of course, they could help with intermediate magic like eco-magic, but even that wasn't ordinary.

"I have no clue…"

Cromwell would have thought more about it if Evan was his official disciple, but he decided to let it go, figuring Evan had his own plans.

He simply grabbed the calendar on his desk and erased all his scheduled guard duties.

"I should just be content that I won't have guard duty."

Cromwell sighed, finding some satisfaction in this ambiguous victory.

-

He had been defeated.

Thoroughly defeated.

He had done his best, but it was still not enough to reach him.

Evan was alone in his room, lost in thought over his sword.

"Did I choose the wrong way……?"

Was it a mistake to use a sword, being a wizard?

Then again, Rudy Astria was too unusual to be considered a typical wizard.

A wizard who employs fists, magic, and even elementals.

He was versatile, if that's the term you want to use, or a jack-of-all-trades.

"But… what about me?"

No matter how much he thought, he had no particular color.

He wasn't exceptionally strong in any one area, nor could he freely handle a variety of skills.

All he did was create a new magic.

This might surprise some, but it wasn't anything spectacular.

Others might argue, but at least to Evan, it was so.

"What do I want to do……?"

He had clinched the Top Seat.

If you only consider this, he could be said to have beaten Rudy Astria, but it felt like an empty victory.

The joint practical was no different.

Clearly, he had been beaten and lost consciousness.

But Rudy Astria didn't steal his gem.

"Intentionally……”

He was unsure what Rudy was aiming for, but he didn't take his score.

Because of this, he felt even more defeated.

As he thought more, he felt like Rudy Astria was giving him the Top Seat.

Evan shook his head when this thought crossed his mind.

Why would Rudy Astria surrender the spot to him?

In this aspect, he firmly believed he was a step ahead of Rudy Astria.

"I will… never concede first place."

A fight?

He could tolerate losing once in a while.

But he couldn't lose in the assessment that evaluated his semester-long efforts.

Evan clenched his fist tightly at this thought.

-

Following the training, the Academy granted the first and second-year students a break.

It appeared to be a chance for the students injured during the training to comfortably receive treatment and refocus on their studies.

After such a sweet break passed.

"Ah……”

I found myself looking at the report card posted on the notice board.

Evan, precisely in the second position.

And Rie, who had secured the first place.

“……What is this?"

This was already a point of concern.

The growth of those around me.

They were progressing too quickly.

Whether it was Rie or Luna……

While I did predict such a situation to some extent, I genuinely didn't consider it a significant problem.

If it helps in the fight against the enemy, it's a boon.

I never thought it could be a hindrance.

"Still, I didn't expect this to happen……”

There was only one reason for this outcome.

The fight between Rie and Luna.

If that fight hadn't taken place, Evan would have comfortably claimed first place.

However, because Luna and Rie fought, Rie claimed all of Luna's points.

I reflected slowly.

The influence joint practical has on the total score and the impact of midterms and final exams……

While the joint practical indeed accounts for a large portion of the score, it didn't carry enough weight to invalidate the results of other exams.

"If Evan… continues to score perfectly……"

But on calculation, it was really a narrow escape.

Evan naturally had to receive perfect scores, and Rie had to underperform on the tests.

It was a fact that a minor score difference has a substantial impact on top-ranking students.

"Sigh……"

I sighed after musing for a while and turned around.

Then I saw Astina trailing behind me.

Her usually noticeable dark circles and fatigue were visible.

Astina, with a vacant expression, held documents in her hand and sighed as she walked past me.

"Astina, ?"

When I called her name, Astina was startled and looked at me.

It appeared she hadn't even noticed that I was next to her.

"Ah… Rudy……"

"Do you have something on your mind? You look quite exhausted."

Astina gave an awkward smile and gestured towards the documents.

"Paperwork to be done. It's more than just a few."

“……Are there that many documents?"

Seeing the documents in Astina's hands, I regretted asking the question.

At first glance, the sheer volume of paperwork was daunting.

"Um… I'll help you carry them."

“……Okay. Thank you."

I took Astina's documents and directed our steps towards the student council room.

I paced alongside her.

Then, Astina broke the silence.

"You've done something peculiar again."

"Peculiar… what?"

I asked Astina, my face a mask of confusion.

"Evan mentioned that you didn't take his points."

"Ah……”

Astina chuckled softly at my response.

"I thought you didn't want to be the top student to not draw attention with such noticeable behavior?"

I chose not to answer Astina's statement.

But, Astina insisted.

"You said before that you opted to be the runner-up because you dread the responsibility that accompanies being the top student."

I gave a slight nod in response to her words.

"Don't be afraid."

Upon hearing those words, I met Astina's gaze.

Astina appeared serious.

But then, her expression relaxed, and she laughed lightly.

"I must be out of my mind because I'm tired. I'm talking nonsense."

Afraid…….

I had no regrets about the decisions I've made so far.

Gradually, I was becoming certain of my survival, and I was also contributing to Evan's development.

Evan's growth…….

Evan's top rank…….

That was the most efficient survival strategy in the end.

Amongst various alternatives, I was selecting the one with the highest probability for everyone at the academy to survive.

And I knew the result…….

"I understand. I'll handle it."

As I was deep in contemplation for a moment, the student council office materialized before my eyes.

Astina unlocked the door to the student council office and attempted to take the documents I was holding.

Then, suddenly, Astina swayed a little, losing her balance.

"Are you alright?"

"Uh……."

Fortunately, she didn't tumble, having rapidly regained her balance, but something was wrong.

I studied her and suggested cautiously.

"Wouldn't it be better to take a brief rest?"

I was concerned she might suddenly collapse.

"I can't… I've got a pile of work these days……."

"Nevertheless, you should take a break."

Then the student council office door swung open, and Rie emerged, declaring,

"Hand it to me, I'll take it."

Rie naturally attempted to take the documents I was holding.

I recalled how Rie appeared after the practical.

She had been staggering and clinging to me.

I expected Rie to shout at me, "It was because of the medicine!" when we meet again, but she was surprisingly calm.

"Rie, you seem to have recovered now?"

As I handed over the documents to Rie, I voiced my thoughts.

Then, as Rie accepted the documents, her hand lightly brushed against mine.

"Huh!!!"

With that, Rie was startled and retreated swiftly, clutching her hand.

"……”

I observed Rie in her current state.

Then, Rie curled up defensively and stammered,

"W-w-what!!! What! G-g-give me the documents! Quickly!"

“……Here you are."

I was dumbfounded by her reaction, which was so different from her initial calm approach.

If she was going to react that way, she should have done so from the beginning.

Rie quickly grabbed the documents and ran into the student council room without saying anything else.

"What was that about……”

I mumbled to myself and shifted my gaze to Astina.

"Well, Astina, health comes first. You should take care of your health while working."

Astina gave me a smile before disappearing into the student council room.

CHAPTER 69
RESPONSIBILITY (2)

Ena, dressed in her pajamas and wrapped in a blanket like a cloak, opened her mouth.

"Let's start the meeting now."

"Woohoo!"

Riku cheered with an excited voice, clapping her hands.

And in front of her sat Luna, looking puzzled.

Luna stared blankly at Ena for a moment before speaking.

"Um… wasn't it supposed to be an all-night study session tonight?"

A few days ago.

Luna was certain that she had heard plans for an all-night study session.

So Luna borrowed many books from the library and stacked them in one corner of the room, waiting for Riku and Ena.

But the moment Riku and Ena showed up, they slipped into their pajamas and started fooling around.

Luna watched them blankly for a moment before regaining her senses.

She couldn't just let this happen!

For the sake of their grades, she had to stop them!

With that thought in mind, Luna nodded her head as if she made a resolution and spoke cautiously to Riku and Ena.

"Guys… we have less than two weeks until the midterms. We need to study."

At this, Ena held up her index finger and clucked her tongue.

"Tsk, tsk, Luna! Good rest leads to better studying! When it's time to play, we should play properly!"

"…"

Luna closed her mouth for a moment.

And then she made a decision.

"Okay! We're only playing today!"

Luna quickly surrendered.

Usually quiet, Ena's words easily persuaded Luna.

Also, they had never had a pajama party together, so Luna wanted to try it at least once.

And now.

"I've prepared something for you."

Ena gave a sly smile and nodded at Riku.

Then Riku picked up the sketchbook behind her and turned the page.

"Huh?"

When she turned the sketchbook, all that appeared was a blank white background.

"Riku, you've got it upside down!"

"Huh?"

She looked at the page she opened and seeing the blank white background, she made a puzzled face.

"Again!"

Upon Ena's command, Riku quickly flipped the sketchbook around and held it correctly.

"Riku, turn the page!"

"Okay!"

When she turned the page, there was a nicely decorated phrase.

"Love… Successful Love Committee?"

As Luna quietly recited the words, Ena tapped the sketchbook with her hand.

"That's right, Luna! You can't just stay like this! Do you know what's going on right now?"

"What… is going on?"

Luna looked at Ena with a confused face.

No matter how much she thought about it, there was nothing going on.

Was it just that she hadn't scored well because she had lost to Rie during the joint practical?

"Luna, let's be honest."

Ena stared at Luna.

"You like Rudy."

"…!"

Luna was taken aback and began to play dumb.

"Ru-Ru-Rudy? What… what are you talking about?"

But no matter how much Luna lied, she was in Ena's hands.

Although it was a lie that even an ordinary person could detect, Ena knew Luna's psychology even better.

"Recently, there's been a lot going on, and it seems like Rudy's been busy too, right? You've been feeling upset about it."

As Ena smoothly continued, suggesting she already knew everything, Luna's eyes widened.

"How did you know…"

Ena was an authority in Luna psychology, having the chance to study in close proximity for a good 7-8 months.

It only took her 3 seconds to read her.

"I've been just watching you two push and pull each other because it was fun, but you can't do that anymore!"

"What do you mean… I can't?"

At that, Ena nodded at Riku again.

As the page of the sketchbook turned, a drawing of an angry Rie appeared.

There were horns above Rie's head and the background was drawn with fire.

Although it was depicted as a devil, the cute drawing didn't make it look too bad.

"Did you draw Rie? Ena, you draw well."

Upon seeing the drawing, Luna smiled brightly and complimented her.

"No! That's not the issue!"

Ena tapped the sketchbook.

"We have a competitor now!"

"A… competitor?"

As the page of the sketchbook turned again, there was a picture of Rie and Rudy with their arms folded together, and Luna was drawn in a corner.

"Princess Rie is going to steal Rudy!"

“…Huh?"

Luna tilted her head at the sudden statement.

And then she burst into laughter.

"Hehehe, Ena, you read too many novels! Why would Rie suddenly show up!"

Ena stared blankly at Luna, who was laughing.

Seeing Ena like that, Luna stopped laughing, realizing something was off.

Luna hardened her expression.

"Is… is that true?"

Ena flapped the blanket on her back with a whoosh.

"I don't joke about my friend's love life! That's who I am!"

"Uh…”

Luna looked at Ena with a puzzled face upon hearing those words.

And then she stood up abruptly with a gloomy face.

"So, Rudy likes Rie?"

She felt a strong negative emotion.

A negative emotion that Luna had never felt before.

It was a mixed feeling of jealousy and something else.

Ena immediately shook her head and waved her hands at that sight.

"Luna! It's not like that! Rudy doesn't know anything! He's just a kid who only thinks about studying and magic, right?"

At Ena's words, Luna blushed and sat down.

And she bowed her head as if she were embarrassed.

"That's right, isn't it? Hahaha… Yeah, yeah…"

Although Luna bowed her head to hide her flushed face, her blush had already reached her neck, so she couldn't hide it.

"Anyway! The problem is not Rudy right now, but Rie!"

"Rie?"

Ena nodded and scrunched her eyebrows.

"As a 12-year veteran of romance novels, this is a certainty."

At Ena's stern voice, Luna nodded in confusion.

"If Ena says so…"

Then Ena pointed at Luna with her index finger.

"So, Luna! You have to win over Rudy before Rie does!"

"Win over!"

At that, Luna clenched her fists tightly.

Ena nodded with a satisfied smile.

"Did you hear about what Rie did to Rudy when she took that medicine?"

"Yeah…"

Luna's expression darkened for a moment at those words.

"A physical attack like that doesn't work on Rudy."

"What!?"

At that, Luna brightened again.

"But we can't say that a man can completely resist physical advances."

"…"

"Though Rudy… he's a little different."

Ena continued, stroking her chin.

With every word, Luna's expression fluctuated between despair and happiness.

Then Luna realized that Ena was teasing her and glared at her.

"So what am I supposed to do…!"

"Okay, okay. But it's clear that you're at a disadvantage right now."

"Is that so…"

"What have you done with Rudy?"

"Do… done what!?"

"Nothing?"

After a moment of thought, Luna quietly opened her mouth.

"Like having dinner together on his birthday?"

"But Rie and Astina were there too."

When Ena said that, Luna drooped like a puppy being scolded by its owner.

"Rie's already hugged him. And she's also a princess with a great position, and she's good at studying."

Upon hearing that, Luna's face turned pale.

And she quietly spat out the words.

"Can't, can't I win?"

Ena looked at Luna like that and smirked.

"But! We're here to overcome such a disadvantage!"

Ena confidently thumped her chest.

"Just trust me!"

"Ena…!"

At Ena's words, Luna was greatly moved.

"I…"

Then Riku quietly opened her mouth.

"When can I put down this sketchbook…"

Looking at Riku, she was holding the sketchbook the whole time, unable to join in on the conversation.

"Oh… sorry…"

"So, sorry! It was just us…"

"I want to join too…"

So Ena and Luna pacified a disheartened Riku and discussed Luna's future and her romance strategy.

-

"What's all this…"

I was watching the incredibly crowded carriages flowing into the academy.

"These are magical tools coming from the Fred family."

Rie was holding a sheet of paper, looking at the carriages.

I came out to help Rie.

It was originally something I didn't have to do, but…

-Hey, help me out a bit.

Rie suddenly came to me and asked for help, so I just came out, confused.

Well, I didn't have any complaints about helping Rie.

Since Astina's condition didn't look good right now, I wanted to help Rie, so that Rie could help Astina.

Helping seemed the right course of action, as Astina's collapse wouldn't benefit me or the academy in any way.

"But, why are so many magical tools coming in?"

When I asked, Rie sighed.

"With the principal away, his subordinate is playing king. He probably wants to invest in his favorite family."

I frowned at Rie's ominous words.

The principal is not here?

"Where did the principal go?"

"I don't know? I only know that he's not at the academy. He was busy after the holiday and went somewhere else?"

The principal isn't here…

"Well, let's get to work first."

Rie held the documents and approached the carriage.

And pointed her finger inside the carriage.

"Go in."

“……What?"

Then Rie showed me the documents.

"You need to check the quantity."

"……”

I was at a loss for words.

Rie had called me to help her with the loading and unloading.

"I can't go in and count, can I? I'm a princess."

I felt rebellious at that.

I'm the son of a duke, right?

Even if I was of lower rank compared to Rie, I had a position where I didn't have to do such things.

“……Why."

Rie seemed to realize this too as she hesitated for a moment.

I stretched my fist out to Rie.

"Ik…… What."

As I held out my hand, Rie hunched her body a bit and spoke.

"Rock, paper, scissors."

“……What?"

"Let's do rock, paper, scissors for the carriages. However, I will do it if I lose once, and you will do it if you lose twice."

And then…

"Aaaargh!!!"

"Is that 3 magic lights?"

"This…… huh…… why is it so…… heavy……”

"Are you sure it's 3 lights?"

"Yes, yes!!"

I watched Rie struggle with the load, grumbling and groaning, and couldn't help but grin.

CHAPTER 70
RESPONSIBILITY (3)

"Anton! Long time no see!"

"Yes, is my father well?"

Anton, a big, burly man, made his way towards the academy entrance.

He was there to inspect the magical tools delivered from his family.

These tools were part of an agreement between his father and Oliver, the academy's vice-principal.

There was no sign of corruption in this process.

Everything was bought at market price, and the quantity matched the agreement.

However, the purchases were made exclusively through Anton's family, avoiding competition, and raising questions.

Nonetheless, since they supplied the academy with much-needed tools, it wasn't an actual problem.

Seeing Anton, the family butler spoke up.

"Your lordship is well, as always."

This man wasn't your average butler.

Trusted by Anton's father, he was more of a close confidant.

"Hehe, didn't my father say anything specific?"

At Anton's question, the butler paused briefly before replying.

"Ah, your lordship asked if there was a problem with what he mentioned last time."

"What my father mentioned?"

Anton tried to recall, but most of his father's naggings were usually forgotten quickly.

He thought for a moment, his eyes widening as he remembered.

"Oh…!"

It was about Levian.

Levian's spellbook, and the experiments carried out by the Fred family.

"Luna… Railer…”

He remembered Luna Railer's spellbook from the practical.

On second thought, her spellbook shared an uncanny resemblance to the one his father had shown him.

Immediately, Anton gave his orders.

"The Railer family."

"Yes?"

"Tell my father to investigate the Railer family."

A sinister smile spread across Anton's face.

-

Four days to the midterm exam.

"Ah, when will he get here…”

Sitting in the library, Luna kept stealing glances at the entrance.

Rudy should be coming in any time now.

She hadn't seen him much lately because he'd been helping out the student council.

But she'd heard he would be at the library today.

-Luna, it's time to bring out your secret weapons!

Even though Ena wasn't physically in the library, her words echoed in Luna's mind.

'Ena… can I really do it… '

Luna shook off the doubt.

Ena didn't say 'can you' but 'you must'!

Just then, she spotted Rudy entering the library.

'Here goes!'

With a faint smile at the sight of Rudy, Luna raised her hand, flicked her hair back, and turned her head.

"Ru, Rudy h-hi!"

Luna tried to put into practice one of Ena's dating techniques.

These techniques were all from romance novels, but Ena was so sure of them that Luna thought it must be right.

The first step was to casually flick her hair back, revealing her neck and ears, a supposedly alluring gesture.

Her greeting, however, came out a bit stuttered, and the gesture seemed somewhat forced.

"Uh… Hi."

Rudy greeted her back, looking slightly puzzled.

'Uh… '

Luna felt her cheeks heat up a bit, but she couldn't let that stop her.

This was only the start.

Once Rudy sat down, she would move to the next step.

As Rudy sat down and started to take out his books, Luna initiated her next move.

"Ah~ Rudy, isn't it hot today?"

She fanned herself with her hand, trying to play up the heat.

Rudy looked at her, even more puzzled.

"Hot today…?"

Even Luna found her comment out of place.

It was fall, and the temperature had been dropping lately.

Despite this, she pressed on.

"Ah… It's so warm."

She untied the ribbon from around her neck, placed it on the desk, and started to unbutton her shirt, revealing her collarbone and the fair skin underneath.

This was Ena's second technique.

Unbuttoning.

Apparently, men found it intriguing when a usually well-dressed person loosened their attire a bit.

Luna could understand that.

She often found herself feeling a bit flustered when she saw Rudy in his sweaty shirt after a workout.

"……"

Rudy glanced at her briefly before focusing on his book.

Her face turned even redder.

'Ugh…… '

Her embarrassment was becoming unbearable, making her feel genuinely hot.

"Ah… it's really hot……”

But Luna wasn't done yet. She had one more trick up her sleeve.

As she pretended to study, she kept a close eye on Rudy.

'Okay…… '

Taking a deep breath, she spoke up.

"Um… Rudy."

“……Yes?"

"I'm having trouble with this. Could you help me?"

She showed him a book on black magic, a subject she knew he was well-versed in.

The fear, though, was that Rudy might not know the answer.

"Ah… I know this one."

Hearing that, Luna brightened up.

"Really? Can you show me how it's done?"

"Sure, it's about—."

Before Rudy could start explaining, Luna stood up.

"Huh?"

Rudy seemed confused, but Luna held her ground.

She walked around the table, positioning herself next to him.

Luna took a seat next to Rudy, her heart pounding.

-This is the real secret weapon.

This was her secret weapon, a gift passed onto her by Ena - a subtly fragrant bath soap.

She had bathed with it just before coming to the library, giving her a sweet, comforting scent.

"Um…"

Moving a little closer to Rudy, Luna nudged the book towards him.

"Could you explain this part?"

"Uh… sure."

'Is this… is this right?'

Her secret weapon seemed to have little effect.

According to Ena, when you ask for help, you create a sense of dependency that stimulates the man's protective instincts.

Being close and smelling good should then disorient him.

But Rudy's face remained focused, utterly absorbed in explaining the answer.

Luna felt a pang of disappointment at his lack of reaction.

'It's guaranteed to work on anyone of the opposite sex!'

'Could it be… Does Rudy not see me as a woman…… '

With this thought echoing in her mind, Luna found herself staring at Rudy's face.

Suddenly, Rudy turned to her.

"Eek…!"

Caught off guard, Luna jumped.

Rudy looked slightly puzzled.

"Did you understand?"

"Yes, yes, yes! You're such a great teacher, Rudy!"

She hadn't really followed any of his explanations.

But she could hardly tell him that she'd been too distracted looking at his face!

"Thank you."

He smiled, making Luna's heart flutter.

Rudy was usually so serious, always absorbed in something.

But she adored these fleeting moments when his warm smile broke through.

And speaking of warm smiles…

"Uh, Luna……"

Suddenly, Rudy leaned in closer.

They were already quite close, and his movement startled her.

His face was getting closer and closer.

'What is happening……!'

Without thinking, Luna shut her eyes as Rudy's face drew nearer.

Before she could make sense of what was happening, she felt a gentle touch on her face.

'What on earth……!!!!'

She flinched, eyes still tightly shut.

"It's done."

Rudy's voice pulled her back to reality.

"Huh?"

Opening her eyes, Luna saw Rudy holding out his hand, a broad smile on his face.

He was holding a small eyebrow hair.

"It was stuck near your eye. I thought it might prick you, so I removed it."

"Uh… ah."

Her face turned a deep shade of red as she looked at Rudy's broad smile.

In a panic, she sprang up from her seat.

"Huh?"

"Ah, thanks for the help! I need to use the, the restroom!"

With that, Luna practically fled the table, hoping Rudy wouldn't notice her blushing face.

Rudy watched in puzzlement as Luna rushed out of the library.

"But… I wasn't finished explaining?"

His gaze flickered between the empty space where Luna had been and the book they'd been studying.

"Was that the only part she didn't understand?"

Scratching his head, Rudy slid the book towards Luna's belongings.

-

Meanwhile, Astina found herself alone in the student council room, sifting through mountains of paperwork.

"That damned……”

Astina had made several trips to vice-principal Oliver, complaining about the unending stream of paperwork.

He'd apologize with a grin, promising to rectify the situation.

Yet nothing changed.

The vice-principal's tasks continued to pile up, with Astina bearing the brunt of it all.

She suspected he was dumping the majority of the work onto the student council to avoid the backlash he'd receive if he delegated it to the professors.

Astina contemplated staging a protest but dismissed the thought.

This was a crucial time for her, having recently assumed the role of an heir.

She didn't want to stir controversy.

Besides, her term as student council president was nearing its end.

Reluctantly, she turned her attention back to the paperwork.

That's when she noticed a crimson drop staining the document she was reading.

"Ah……”

It was a nosebleed.

Astina quickly tilted her head back and rummaged for a handkerchief.

It was becoming a regular occurrence, her nosebleeds.

She'd lost count of how many times it had happened this month.

"I want to run away."

Yet, she had responsibilities to consider.

The responsibility of being the student council president and the responsibility of being the heir to the Persia family.

"Rudy Astria……”

His confession of fear towards such responsibility resonated with her now.

But she couldn't afford to back down.

Power came hand in hand with responsibility, and with power…

"I can achieve what I want……”

What exactly that was, she wasn't sure.

But she knew that without preparation, she wouldn't stand a chance when the time came to seize what she desired.

Astina sighed and set aside the blood-stained documents.

She plunged back into the paperwork, knowing that once she was done, she would have to hit the books for the midterms.

"Just a little longer…”

With another sigh, Astina refocused on her work.

CHAPTER 71
RESPONSIBILITY (4)

"The exam's finished," the professor announced, signaling the end of our midterm.

I couldn't help but smile.

"This has to be a record…"

I hadn't held anything back during this exam.

After the joint practical, there was no reason for me to do so.

Rie had claimed the top spot, and to keep my second rank, I needed to excel in this exam.

I knew Evan would do well.

He always does.

I had to focus on my own performance, not his.

And now, after giving my best shot, I felt like I had achieved an unprecedented score.

"But the exam wasn't that tough."

In comparison to the challenging final exam last semester, this one seemed relatively straightforward.

I had an inkling that it would be easier when I reviewed the past exams.

Given the joint practical, most students were short on study time.

In response, the professors had seemingly toned down the exam's difficulty.

Feeling good about my performance, I headed back to the dormitory.

"Time for some rest"

Maybe I should go out for a meal…

Lost in my thoughts, I spotted Astina in the distance.

"Oh, there's Astina."

I made my way towards her.

Suddenly, Astina wobbled, losing her footing.

"Astina?" I called out, alarmed.

She was headed for a nasty fall, her head aimed directly at the ground.

"Damn."

Pooling mana in my feet, I sprinted towards her.

I lunged, reaching for her head which was perilously close to the ground.

Please…!

Astina hit the ground, but my hand slipped between her head and the hard earth, softening her fall.

"Phew…"

I sighed, relieved.

Astina's body had hit the ground, but I managed to shield her head.

Still, I couldn't relax just yet.

"Astina, Astina!" I called, quickly rising to check on her.

Blood trickled from her nose.

She was unconscious, eyes shut tight.

-

Groaning, Astina fluttered open her eyes, clutching her head. "My head…”

What happened?

She tried to gather her thoughts.

She had been heading back to the dormitory when suddenly, her head had started spinning.

Then, everything had gone dark.

A voice snapped her back to reality.

"Are you okay?"

Astina turned to see a familiar face.

"Rudy Astria…?"

She murmured, recognizing him.

"What… happened?"

"You collapsed while walking."

"I… collapsed?"

Astina sighed.

She'd been feeling tired lately, but she hadn't expected to faint.

"How long was I out?"

"An hour or two at most. You should get more rest."

"Really…?"

Astina sighed, visibly relieved.

Then, she tried to get up.

Rudy quickly tried to stop her.

"Don't stand up yet. You need to rest."

Ignoring him, Astina made another attempt to rise.

"I'll rest in my room."

Rudy pressed his finger against her forehead, pushing her back down gently.

"What are you doing?"

Astina asked, startled.

"If you go back to your room, you'll go back to work tomorrow, won't you?"

Rudy reasoned.

Astina didn't have a rebuttal.

"Just stay in the hospital for a week or two. I'll talk to the hospital."

"What? No way."

"Yes way."

Rudy insisted firmly.

His stern expression softened into a smile.

"Don't worry about the student council. I'll help out."

"But… there are things… I need to do…"

"I'll bring anything you really need to do. I'll handle the small stuff. I've been helping you all this time, so I know a thing or two," Rudy assured her.

Astina smiled wryly.

"Thank you, Rudy."

She was grateful to Rudy, but also felt a pang of guilt.

Astina looked at Rudy and confessed, "I told you not to shy away from responsibility, and look at me now…"

She'd been the one to advise Rudy about responsibility, yet she hadn't managed to take care of her own health.

It was embarrassing.

Rudy offered a slight smile.

"I admire you, Astina."

"Eh?"

Astina looked puzzled.

"Even when I'm avoiding responsibility because I'm scared, you always step up. Isn't that true, Astina?"

"But what's the point… I've ended up collapsing because I couldn't look after myself."

"Doesn't that just show how dedicated you are?"

Astina chuckled lightly at Rudy's comment.

She felt a warm sensation in her heart.

Someone acknowledged and appreciated her efforts, and it made her feel proud.

Astina always tackled challenges with full effort, but this also meant she never took it easy even with minor tasks.

She was always ready to face problems head-on, believing it was the right thing to do.

But it was because of this belief that today's incident happened.

But she realized that it was okay to take things easy sometimes.

Then Rudy said he admired her.

His words wrapped around her heart, acting as a soothing balm.

Much-needed words.

Words she longed to hear.

Words that warmed her.

"No one tried to stop you before you collapsed?"

Rudy asked.

"A lot of people did try. But I was too stubborn to listen."

Rudy fell silent.

Yes, many had tried to caution Astina, but she had stubbornly persisted.

"You should start listening to those around you. They're all just worried about you, Astina."

Astina gave a small smile at Rudy's words.

"Alright, Rudy. If you see me pushing too hard, you'll be the one to stop me."

She had more to say, but she swallowed the words.

Now wasn't the right time.

Rudy picked up his bag from the floor.

"I should get going. I don't want to keep you from your rest."

"Eh?"

Astina had reflexively grabbed his sleeve as he turned to leave.

"Ah…”

She too seemed surprised by her own action.

It was as if her body had reacted before her mind could process what was happening.

Astina looked at Rudy, her face flushed.

"Can you… stay a little longer?"

Rudy blinked, looking surprised at her words.

"I just… I just want to talk. I haven't had a proper conversation in a while. I've been so busy with paperwork…”

At her words, Rudy grinned and sat back down.

"Alright, I'll stay a bit longer. But just an hour. After that, you need to get some sleep."

Astina smiled, grateful.

"Thank you."

While the two were chatting, someone was eavesdropping outside the infirmary door.

"Hmm…”

Rie was listening to Rudy and Astina's conversation, a strange look on her face.

She had come to visit the sick Astina, but when she saw that she was busy, she decided to wait.

But as she listened, she couldn't help but feel something twist in her chest.

Something akin to jealousy.

-

At the mansion of the Fred family, a man sat in the office, laughing to himself.

"Haha…"

He was large in size, with a shiny, oily face that wasn't exactly pleasant to look at.

"Very good…"

The man was the head of the Fred family, Anton's father.

He was seated in a chair, reading a letter.

Although the chair was not small, it looked quite the opposite with him sitting in it.

If Anton could be likened to a small pig, then the head of the Fred family was a colossal pig.

"The Railer family…"

After hearing Anton's story from the butler, the head of the Fred family had immediately sent people to the Railer territory.

Naturally, they had done this covertly, under the guise of being travelers, without making their intentions known to the Railer family.

What they found was intriguing.

Levian had been to the Railer family's territory.

Upon showing the locals a portrait of Levian, there were a few who recognized him.

"Who would have thought he'd hide in such a remote place…"

The Railer family had a relatively small and insignificant territory located at the fringes of the empire.

The head of the Fred family was hearing about this family for the first time.

He hadn't expected Levian to seek refuge in such a disconnected place.

More interestingly, the locals also mentioned that Levian had supposedly died some time ago.

The head of the Fred family recalled Anton's message.

The story about the Railer family's daughter possessing a mysterious spellbook.

A spellbook that bore a resemblance to Levian's.

It wasn't something that could be dismissed lightly.

"I need to make a plan."

The head of the Fred family chuckled ominously and rang a small bell.

Shortly thereafter, a maid entered the office.

"Did you call for me?"

"Yes."

The head of the Fred family held out a letter.

"Deliver this to Oliver…"

And he selected another from the stack.

"And this one to the Astria family."

The recipient of the second letter was none other than Ian, Rudy's older brother.

CHAPTER 72
RESPONSIBILITY (5)

"Rudy Astria, would you mind handling this?"

"Yes, of course."

After Astina was hospitalized, I started spending a lot of time in the student council room when I wasn't studying.

I'd planned on exercising, but helping out with the student council took priority.

The council was struggling without her since she typically shouldered a considerable amount of the work.

That's why when I offered to help, the members warmly welcomed me.

With time, as I helped, I started getting closer to the other council members.

Initially, they were somewhat wary around me, but after watching me for a while, they seemed to get a better understanding of who I was.

However……

"It feels like we're piling too much work on someone who isn't even a council member, Vice President," Rie pointed out.

Her interference became a frequent hurdle, even in my conversations with others.

"Rudy Astria, why don't we have lunch together?"

"Rudy, let's go for lunch."

Before anyone could respond, Rie would butt in and derail the conversation.

While I had gotten closer to the council members, I could never hold a proper

conversation with them because of Rie's constant interruptions.

"Hey, let's go," Rie nudged me, ready for lunch.

I looked at Rie, then at the pile of work on the desk in front of me, "We're all about to eat, why don't we all go together?"

Rie frowned at my suggestion, "I don't want to."

I shot Rie a glare, but she held my gaze defiantly, creating a tense atmosphere.

The council member who'd initially invited me to lunch awkwardly chimed in, "Ah, we have somewhere else to go! Sorry, Rudy. Maybe you could go with Rie first?"

"What?"

I looked at the council member, confused.

"We can go after you've eaten…"

"No, no, it's something we need to do right now!"

He glanced at Rie, nervously waving his hands.

"Well, if you're busy, what can you do?"

Rie smirked, feigning sympathy.

"I, I'll go!"

"Alright~ Take care~."

The council member hurriedly left the room.

"…Why is he like that?"

"What did I do~?"

Rie shrugged, a sly grin on her face.

She had an annoying face, but soon I sighed and nodded.

"Alright, let's go eat."

At my words, Rie's face lit up with a smile, "Sure!"

So, we ended up heading to the cafeteria together and finding a seat.

"What are you doing after this?"

"After eating?"

I thought for a moment before replying, "I think I'll go check if the magic tools have arrived."

I couldn't help but wonder just how much Vice Principal Oliver had been exploiting his position.

Despite ordering a massive quantity of magic tools last time, more were still due to arrive.

"Ah, from the Fred family……"

Rie mumbled to herself and seemed lost in thought for a moment.

She hesitated briefly before she carefully spoke up.

"Rudy, I didn't plan on bringing this up, but…"

"Yes?"

Rie looked at me seriously.

"There's something suspicious about the Fred family's recent activities."

"The Fred family?"

I was puzzled.

The Fred family, where Anton is from, was brought up out of nowhere.

I was aware it was about time for Anton's secret story to unfold, but hearing about their suspicious activities made me uneasy.

"Recently, the Fred family has been investigating Levian."

“…Levian?"

That name coming up now seemed out of place…

"Actually, it's not too odd. The Fred family was originally tasked with the investigation into Levian's disappearance."

Rie rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

"But it's odd that they're reopening the investigation after so long. They essentially left it as a cold case."

Her explanation made me furrow my brows.

Then, Rie reassured me with a smile.

"Don't worry, we're trying to figure out what's happening. But just to be safe, you should warn Luna."

I nodded in response to Rie's advice.

Suddenly, Rie's eyes widened.

"Ah…!"

She glared at me, saying, "I, I'll tell her. I'll be the one to warn Luna."

"What?"

"I'll do it."

Rie looked at me as if she was flustered, but also as if she was pressuring me.

"Let me do it."

Rie leaned in closer as she spoke.

I sighed in response.

She's been acting so strange lately.

"Alright, you tell her."

I agreed, but still I thought I should warn Luna myself.

-

"Six carriages…"

I stood in front of the main building, watching the approaching carriages.

But something seemed off.

Five were cargo carriages, but one was a standard passenger carriage.

"What's going on?"

The paperwork had stated there would be six cargo carriages.

I couldn't help but be suspicious about the unexpected carriage.

"Excuse me."

I approached and stopped the carriages.

The coachman appeared puzzled.

"What's with the carriage in the back?"

"Huh? We have no idea."

The coachman shook his head, clearly clueless.

Then, a man stepped out from the carriage at the back.

He was a butler, neatly dressed in a suit.

"Who are you?"

The man bowed and responded.

"Good day. I am Carol, a butler from the Fred family."

I cut to the chase without any formalities.

"What's with the carriage in the back?"

Carol replied with an awkward smile, looking apologetic.

"I apologize. We failed to ready six cargo carriages, so one passenger carriage was arranged instead."

Upon closer inspection, that carriage indeed bore the Fred family's emblem.

They used a family carriage because they didn't have enough cargo carriages?

I was skeptical.

I walked directly over to the carriage and swung the door open.

Inside, small boxes were stacked up.

"Ah, we transported fragile items separately in this carriage."

Carol, coming up behind me, laughed and explained.

His smile was undoubtedly amiable, but it gave me a bad feeling.

"Alright for now. However, I will report this to the other professors."

"Haha… Okay."

I shut the carriage door and surveyed my surroundings.

I noticed the mercenaries who were hired to escort the carriages.

Then, I glanced at the documents again.

"There seem to be more mercenaries than listed, aren't there?"

Carol scratched his head at my statement.

"I apologize. Recently, due to rebel activity, we felt compelled to hire more mercenaries. It's for added security."

His explanation made me frown.

"Please send them away."

"Huh?"

Carol looked at me, baffled.

"Send the mercenaries away. This is an academy. No matter how many extra you hired, you cannot bring them inside. They should be waiting outside."

"Well……"

As I voiced this, I noticed a vein bulge on Carol's forehead.

While grinding his teeth, Carol asked a peculiar question.

"But… aren't you Rudy Astria…?"

"That's correct."

I replied to Carol's question matter-of-factly.

Was he hoping to just push and brush the matter under the rug?

But I was not some ordinary student.

What could they possibly do to me?

"But… why…"

Carol seemed frustrated and stopped mid-sentence.

He stared at me.

His attitude began to irritate me.

They were in the wrong, yet they were giving me such a look?

I spoke assertively.

"Get them out."

“…Excuse me?"

Then, Carol reacted with an even more shocked expression.

"Didn't you hear me? Get everyone out. Do you think I'm easy because I'm a student?"

At my stern words, Carol bowed his head in surprise.

"I-I'm sorry. We will all leave."

"Guard."

I signaled for a nearby guard.

"You called?"

"Expel all these people and reprimand the guards at the entrance who let them in without proper checks. I will submit a written report regarding this incident."

"Ah, understood."

Following my orders, the guard escorted all the mercenaries, save for one or two, towards the academy entrance.

After confirming this, I glanced at Carol who was still bowing his head.

I replied haughtily.

"Don't overstep your bounds just because the principal isn't here."

At that, Carol looked up at me in surprise.

Ignoring him, I walked towards the cargo carriages and announced.

"I'm going to check the items."

While I was examining the goods, Carol disappeared.

I didn't care where he went; he had been granted permission to enter.

"Hmm…”

I paused for a moment, lost in thought.

The look in Carol's eyes from earlier.

Despite my aggression, his gaze didn't falter.

Instead, he looked at me even more sharply.

"How cheeky…”

I felt a twinge of irritation.

However, the irritation faded quickly.

A smirk took its place.

"I really am becoming like a noble."

-

Carol was walking through the academy.

"What on earth?"

The Fred family and the Astria family had a fairly cordial relationship.

Rather, they were close to being comrades on the same boat.

Yet, the plan was starting to derail.

He had sent a letter to Ian Astria, assuming that Rudy Astria would also be informed, but it seemed that he had miscalculated.

"Did he not relay the message?"

Carol frowned and muttered to himself.

"Sigh… I don't know."

It was infuriating that he had been challenged by a mere student, but given the difference in their statuses, he couldn't protest.

"I have to do what I was told to."

Carol stopped his steps as he reached a specific room.

He knocked on the door.

"It's Carol. May I come in?"

A voice from inside answered.

"Yes, come in."

Carol opened the door and entered.

Vice Principal Oliver was sitting inside.

CHAPTER 73
RESPONSIBILITY (6)

"Levian's spellbook… has been found?"

Surprise etched onto Oliver's face.

Carol responded to Oliver's astonishment with a nod.

"A student named Luna Railer has it."

Oliver rubbed his chin and adjusted his glasses.

"Luna… Railer…"

"But why wasn't there any news? Something unique like that, word should have spread…"

Carol's statement made sense.

Typically, if professors find something unique, they'd usually document or share their research about it…

"Who's been keeping this quiet…"

A few names came to mind.

Notably, Cromwell and Mcguire.

These professors tended to act as they pleased.

They neither conformed to the Academy's rules, nor heeded the advice of the Vice Principal or their peers.

They pursued research in their own way and reveled in their eccentricities.

Still, the reason these professors were tolerated despite such behavior was due to their exceptional results.

As the Vice Principal, Oliver couldn't simply dismiss these professors.

Moreover, Principal McDowell favored these professors, giving them considerable influence within the Academy.

"Could it be them…”

Oliver rubbed his chin, furrowing his brows.

Now was not the time to worry about this.

Whether Cromwell or Mcguire had suppressed the information could be determined later.

The task now was to acquire Levian's spellbook.

It would surely cause a stir in the academic community.

A magical book that activates a magic circle with one's own mana.

It was an unprecedented invention and discovery.

He planned to exclusively control this technology, a technology that could revolutionize academia, with the Fred family and himself.

He can leverage this achievement to secure the position of Principal.

The he could deal with the problematic professors after assuming the Principal's role.

"So, what's the plan?"

At Oliver's question, Carol let out a sigh.

“…That's the issue."

"What is?"

"We initially planned to kidnap Luna Railer today."

Oliver frowned at Carol's words.

"Kidnap?"

The thought of abducting a student from the Academy wasn't a decision to be taken lightly.

The Academy was responsible for its students' safety.

The students were the Empire's future and the offspring of nobles.

If word got out that the Academy couldn't protect a student, it would lose credibility.

It was this trust that enabled the Academy to receive substantial support from the nobility.

This wasn't a trivial matter.

"Why not just steal the item?"

At Oliver's suggestion, Carol shook her head.

"We barely know anything about the spellbook. If Luna has a unique ability, and only people with this ability can use the spellbook, the research process will be significantly more complicated."

Oliver nodded in understanding at Carol's explanation.

That made sense.

If the item couldn't be used by an average person, numerous tests would be needed to figure out the unique attribute.

Such experiments wouldn't just be expensive, they'd also be time-consuming.

"So, what was the initial plan?"

"We thought to use mercenaries."

"Mercenaries?"

"The plan was to hire mercenaries to start a fire at the dormitory and create chaos. In the confusion, we'd take Luna Railer. It would appear as though Luna Railer died in the fire."

But there was an issue with this strategy.

"Luna Railer is a top-notch wizard. Even other professors notice her. And you think she would die from just a fire?"

Carol responded to Oliver's question with a smug grin.

"Isn't Principal McDowell absent?"

"You expect me to handle it?"

Oliver tightened his fist.

He was hinting that he should bear all the responsibility.

"Who do you think you are to make that decision?"

Carol smiled at Oliver.

"Have you forgotten who put you in your position?"

Upon hearing this, Oliver's eyes widened.

"You're not suggesting… the Astria family is involved, too."

Seeing Oliver's reaction, Carol grinned and clapped his hands as if he had an idea.

"Oh, but Rudy Astria messed up our plan. Why wouldn't he cooperate, being part of the Astria family?"

"You mean that kid? Isn't it obvious? No matter how capable he is, there's no way Ian Astria would tell him about it."

"Huh?"

Carol voiced his confusion, but Oliver didn't elaborate.

"Well… you don't need to know that."

Carol frowned at his words, but he continued.

"So, should we rehire the dismissed mercenaries?"

Oliver wasn't a fan of this plan, but since it was an order from the Astria family, he had to comply.

If he failed to follow the Astria's instruction, his downfall would only be a matter of time…

And if Astria were involved, the disappearance of a mere baron's daughter would be hushed up without any fuss.

"Proceed as planned."

-

A little while passed.

"Yaaawn……”

Robert yawned in his lab.

Today was Professor Robert's day on duty.

That's why he was still at the academy, well past his usual leaving time.

However, it was about time to go.

Being on duty just meant he had to stay at the academy until 10 pm.

Feeling hungry, Professor Robert rubbed his belly.

"Hmm… I might indulge in a drink tonight, for a change."

However, it was late.

He could go to a bar for a drink, but no liquor stores would be open at this hour.

He was also concerned about the potential hangover the next day if he drank at a bar, not to mention the extra cost.

"I just want a few drinks……”

Robert licked his lips.

"Now that I think about it…”

Robert clapped his hands as if he'd remembered something.

"Cromwell must have some hidden booze in his lab…?"

Cromwell was a family man now.

And his wife despised alcohol.

He had a tendency to act strange when he drank, which was why she didn't like it.

However, Cromwell wasn't the type to quit drinking.

For him, alcohol and cigarettes were essential.

"He already left for the day……”

Robert smirked.

"I'll sneak in after my shift."

Sure, he could go steal the booze right now, but he was worried that others might look down on him if he was seen walking around with alcohol while on duty.

Even Robert, who usually didn't care about others' opinions, had a certain line he wouldn't cross.

"Hmm~."

Robert started humming a tune, excited about the prospect of pilfering Cromwell's

expensive alcohol, as he continued his paperwork.

-

"Ugh……”

I yawned while studying in the library.

Then I checked the time.

The clock was slowly moving towards 10:30.

"Oh, it's already this late."

But something felt off.

“……Why isn't Luna here?"

The reason I was in the library was to give Luna at least a heads-up.

I assumed that if I just sat and studied, she would eventually show up.

But she didn't.

What's going on?

Luna was usually in the library. She would say something otherwise.

She always told me if something was up.

But not today.

"Is something wrong?"

I muttered to myself as I began to organize the stack of books.

"Huh?"

Then I heard a voice behind me.

When I turned around, I saw Riku and Ena.

"Oh, you're here. Welcome."

I greeted them cheerfully, but Ena looked around with a puzzled look.

"Uh, but… where's Luna?"

"Huh?"

I was taken aback.

"Luna… didn't she have something else to do?"

"Huh? No… She definitely said she would be studying in the library with us…"

A sinking feeling started to form in my chest.

Something wasn't right.

"Huh? Hey! Where are you going!"

Ena called after me, but I didn't look back and began to run.

Then I thought calmly.

The carriage of the Fred family is currently inside the academy.

The carriage was supposed to stay at the academy for a day.

Considering the distance from the academy to the Fred family's estate, the plan was to provide accommodation at the academy, they stay for the evening, and then leave.

Therefore, under normal circumstances, the carriage should only be leaving tomorrow.

That's how it was written down.

However, there was a slight discrepancy.

Six carriages.

Among them, there was one ordinary carriage.

No matter how I looked at it, it seemed suspicious.

The absence of Astina.

The sudden error in the documents.

The odd behavior of the Fred family.

Finally, the disappearance of Luna.

When I put it all together, a terrifying picture began to form.

Were they after Luna's spellbook…?

Or even Luna herself?

They had manipulated the carriage list, allowing an extra one to leave at night…

With that thought in mind, I decided on a course of action.

At this hour, the professor on duty would have already left.

It was too late to ask for their help.

So the first priority was to prevent the carriage from leaving.

The time of departure for that particular carriage was already recorded.

However, if the Fred family used their influence to quash this issue, the guards would be powerless to stop them.

I had to hurry.

I sprinted towards the main gate.

That's when I heard students screaming.

"Fire! Fire!"

Soon, smoke began to billow from the dormitory.

"Ah."

Hearing that, I became certain.

I had to move faster.

CHAPTER 74
RESPONSIBILITY (7)

"Fire!"

The shout echoed through the dormitory.

Evan stepped outside his room, his thoughts racing.

'A sudden fire?'

Something wasn't right.

The chance of a fire in the dormitory was very low.

Students from the Magic department were always prepared to put out fires, and alchemy students always kept fire-extinguishing magic scrolls nearby when concocting their volatile potions.

So, an actual fire was unlikely.

Moreover, the quick reaction of students to the shout of 'fire!' raised more doubts.

'What's happening?'

In the absence of a professor, students would normally try to put out the fire themselves.

But now, everyone was heading outside without hesitation.

As though under a spell.

Evan wasn’t the only one sensing this.

Others felt the strangeness too.

But seeing everyone else hurry out, they chose to follow.

Evan hesitated briefly, looking towards where the supposed fire was.

'Should I check it out?'

He thought for a bit and then decided against it.

He didn't need to get involved.

If he went to the reported fire's location, he might face a situation he wasn't ready for.

In doing so, he might get hurt, which could impact the rest of his semester.

With that thought, Evan began to head for the exit again.

As he was about to leave, a familiar face appeared, moving against the flow of students.

"Yeniel?"

"Oh, Evan."

Hearing Evan's voice, Yeniel stopped and rushed to him.

Seeing her, concern appeared on Evan's face.

"Yeniel, where are you headed? There's word of a fire, you should be evacuating."

Yeniel shook her head.

"It's strange. All this chaos over just a fire?"

"Ah, there was a big fire before you arrived here. Maybe it's the same now, which is why everyone's leaving."

Evan said lightly, thinking it wasn't a big deal.

But Yeniel didn't like his casual attitude.

Her face showed her disagreement.

"Everyone’s leaving over a mere fire? The students of Liberion Academy?"

Yeniel’s strong words and look caught Evan off guard.

He was used to seeing Yeniel happy or neutral around him.

Her sudden anger was surprising.

Looking annoyed, Yeniel spoke.

"I want to see for myself. What will you do?"

Despite her words, Evan was firm.

"I don't need to go… I can't help with the fire… Let’s leave, Yeniel."

"Really, Evan…”

Yeniel seemed ready to express her anger.

But suddenly…

"What?"

Confusion appeared on her face.

And then…

"Oh… No!!"

With wide eyes, Yeniel raced out of the dormitory.

Evan watched Yeniel with confusion.

"Did she change her mind?"

He followed after her.

-

"Phew…”

Carol wiped his brow with his sleeve.

Luna was motionless at his feet.

Next to Carol, Anton stood, with a satisfied smirk.

Anton, arms crossed, said,

"That took more time than I thought."

"I'm sorry. I misjudged her because she mainly uses magic circles."

Luna was a wizard known for her use of magic circles.

Without a pre-prepared magic circle, she was as vulnerable as anyone else.

Yet, Luna was one of the best at using circle magic and was skilled even in basic spells.

But she was no match for both Carol and Anton.

"We should get the spellbook now."

Following Anton's words, Carol moved to Luna and grabbed her bag.

He began searching for Luna's room key.

"What's this…?"

Carol stumbled upon something unexpected.

"Anton, is this…?"

It was Levian's spellbook.

Luna always had Levian's spellbook on her.

Not as a weapon for emergencies, but because she feared someone might steal it from her room.

Thus, she never thought to use it when they ambushed her.

Anton smirked.

"This is quite the lucky find."

Carol glanced at Anton and grinned back.

"I'm taking Luna Railer with me."

"You've told the mercenaries to move as soon as possible, right?"

Carol glanced at a pocket watch.

"Yes, they're on it."

Anton nodded in response.

"Good, let's get her on the carriage."

With that, Carol lifted Luna and walked to the carriage with Anton by his side.

After putting Luna inside, Carol said his farewells to Anton.

"I'm off."

"Alright, say hi to your dad for me."

With a quick nod, Carol started the carriage.

As he watched, Anton turned to go to the flaming dorm.

"What?"

Suddenly, he saw someone sprinting towards him from the distance.

The person was closing in fast.

"Who… who's that?"

The night's darkness only revealed the individual's shadow, making it hard to tell who it was.

But one thing was clear.

A strong desire to kill.

This person was overflowing with it and was heading straight for Anton.

Anton braced himself.

He had to face this unknown person.

Even if he didn't know their motive, but anyone releasing such a strong wave of killing intent undoubtedly had a reason for it.

Anton pointed the ring on his finger at the charging figure.

"Activate!"

Right away, several ice spears appeared around him.

It was a magical tool.

"Fire!"

The ice spears shot towards the figure quickly.

But, it was useless.

Crack.

The figure slowed down for a moment and broke the incoming ice spears with his hands.

The ice spears broke apart, and the figure started running towards Anton again.

"What… what the hell is going on?!"

Fear rose in Anton, pushing him to back away.

Who was this man coming at him?

He was frightened, but now wasn't the time for fear.

Anton clenched his teeth and held his necklace tight.

"Activate!"

Now, three fire sparks flew out.

It was magic like the explosion magic Rie used.

"I didn't want to use this…!"

Anton threw the magic at the speeding figure.

"Die!"

Without thinking about what would happen next, Anton released his explosion magic.

Then, a voice echoed from the figure's direction.

"Priscilla. Guardian Spirit."

-KWAAAAAAAAA!!!!

The explosion magic blew up on touch.

A huge flame burst out, sending a wave of force all around.

Black smoke poured out from the blast.

Holding back his breath, Anton focused on the rising smoke.

He couldn't see through the dark smoke, but he felt a bit relieved.

With such a big explosion, not many could have lived through it.

"Ha… haha… who could've made it through that?"

Anton whispered to himself, looking around cautiously.

"I should get out fast…"

An explosion like that would surely draw eyes.

He had to leave, and fast.

Thinking that, Anton began to move.

-Thunk!

Suddenly, a noise rang out behind him, like someone had stomped the ground.

"Huh?"

Anton slightly turned his head to find where the sound came from.

What he saw was a hand.

-Crunch!!!!

"Arghhhhhh!!!!"

After spotting the hand, Anton's face was forced right into the ground.

The hand he saw had grabbed his face and slammed him to the ground.

Blood started pooling from behind Anton's head.

Then, a terrifying voice sounded.

A voice full of anger and the desire to kill.

"Hey, quiet down."

Hearing that voice, Anton shuddered, and reality hit him.

And the hand gripping his face.

Through the gaps between the fingers, he saw a face.

It was… Rudy Astria.

There was no emotion on Rudy Astria's face, but deep down, he was boiling with rage.

"Uh… Ru… Rudy Ast-."

Trying to say his name, Rudy lifted Anton's face with one hand and crashed it back to the ground.

-Thud!!!!!

"Aaaarrrrgggghhhhh!!!!"

Sharp pain surged through the back of Anton's head.

Rudy put his hand over Anton's mouth.

"Hey, you're too loud."

Rudy looked at him sharply.

"It's night. What if you wake people up?"

Rudy Astria's stern face sent chills down Anton's spine.

His face turned pale, and his knees felt weak.

Shaking with fear, Anton tried to speak.

“Mm… hmm… mmm…”

But with Rudy's hand over his mouth, his cries were barely heard.

Seeing this, Rudy quickly asked,

“Luna Railer.”

“Mmm?”

“Where's Luna?”

Anton quickly pointed to the academy's main gate.

Rudy then let go of Anton's mouth.

“How long ago?”

“S-sniff… just a little while ago.”

Anton remained on the ground, crying.

Rudy Astria rushed towards the academy's main gate.

A pain pulsed in the back of Anton's head, but the terror he felt overshadowed it.

He wanted to flee, but his legs were too shaky.

“Hmm… hmm…”

He then heard someone approaching.

The sound of fast breathing and running steps.

To Anton, these seemed like the steps of a rescuer.

Through his tears, Anton begged.

“P-please… help… me… hmm…”

Hearing his plea, the steps grew louder.

Soon, a figure stood over him.

“Please help…”

The person looked at him, pausing.

Looking up, teary-eyed, Anton recognized the face.

“Ah…?”

“Hey, did Rudy Astria pass by here? Which way did he go?”

It was Rie looking down at him.

CHAPTER 75
RESPONSIBILITY (8)

In the dormitory, Locke emerged from his room, a puzzled look etched across his face.

"Fire?"

He couldn't believe it.

The idea that all the students were scattering because of a mere fire seemed absurd.

The existence of the fire itself appeared to him as an absurdity.

With a half-smirk, Locke leisurely began his stroll.

Yet, his path deviated from the rest.

He was advancing towards the fire.

As he approached the burning area, an odd spectacle met his gaze.

"What's this?"

There were smoldering ashes.

Yet they hardly generated more than wisps of smoke; it didn't feel like an actual fire.

Looking at this, Locke was certain.

Someone had intentionally created this situation.

But who? And why was everyone leaving?

Without even properly investigating?

Locke didn't have the answers, not yet.

"I'll find out when I get there."

That was his train of thought as he continued his stride.

Gradually, the answers began to reveal themselves.

"What's he doing?"

The lounging mercenaries were startled to see Locke.

Locke unsheathed his sword.

This was an outcome he had somewhat anticipated.

Without a moment's hesitation, Locke launched his attack.

"Cough!"

His sword, gleaming under the light, brought down the mercenaries one after the other.

Caught off-guard, their weapons set aside.

They didn't stand a chance against Locke unarmed.

And so, in a brief instant,

"Whew…"

Locke cleaned the blood off his blade.

Most of the mercenaries now laid sprawled on the floor, victims of his sword.

"Two of them, huh…"

There were those who abandoned their comrades and fled.

Two of them.

Clutching their wounds, they were making their way up the stairs.

"There are more, is that it…"

Had they descended, it would have meant they were retreating.

Then, a groan emanated from a fallen mercenary.

"Ugh… save me…"

Locke walked over to him and crouched down.

He stared the mercenary in the eyes.

Seeing Locke, the man trembled in fear.

"P-Please, let me live…"

Locke held his gaze, then asked,

"Who gave the order?"

The mercenary hesitated, trembling.

If he exposed the mastermind, he was doomed.

He had loved ones he had to guard.

But that was a concern for the future.

The present demanded survival.

Finally, the mercenary spoke in a hushed tone.

"It… it's the Fred family."

Nodding, Locke seemed pleased and continued his interrogation.

"How many of you are here, and who's the toughest among you?" Locke pressed.

The mercenary shuddered as he answered, "There are 13 of us… The toughest… he can defeat six to seven mercenaries effortlessly…"

Locke rose from his crouched position as the mercenary finished speaking.

"H-huh…! Don't… don't hurt me!"

A fallen man whimpered, recoiling from Locke's sudden movement.

Locke didn't even acknowledge him.

'Four down… two hurt… and the strongest can take six to seven… '

Locke's thought process was interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps.

The sound steadily grew louder, and shadows began to take shape.

Leading them was a hefty man, obviously the head of the group.

"We've got a visitor," he sneered smugly.

Locke dismissed him, continuing with his train of thought.

'How many are left?'

Even though he'd learned complex mathematical concepts like differentiation and integration at the academy, Locke hardly ever attended these classes.

Doing calculations in his head was beyond him.

He was a warrior, not an academic.

"What are you doing?"

The leader asked, irritation creeping into his tone.

Nonchalantly, Locke replied. "And who are you?"

Visibly frustrated, the leader growled, "Ugh…! Annoying."

His features twisted into a smirk.

"Alright, since you asked, let me introduce myself. I am the symbol of freedom, admired by even knights. I am the Mercenary King, Cedric!"

His proclamation startled the other mercenaries.

"Ce, Cedric?"

"Is… is he really Cedric?"

Their whispers were soon swallowed up by Cedric's self-satisfied laughter.

"Time to give up—"

"Pfft."

Locke suddenly started laughing, provoking Cedric's anger.

"Are you mocking me?"

All Locke did was chuckle.

Eventually, his laughter died down.

"I'm not sure who you think the Mercenary King is, but……"

Locke unsheathed his sword, pointing it towards Cedric.

"The Mercenary King is a fool. He's just a guy who spouts about freedom. He's not someone to look up to."

Locke's words left the mercenaries stunned.

"I suppose I'll have to take care of you all then."

The numbers were irrelevant.

All he needed to do was cut everyone down.

-

"Huff… Huff…”

I ran as fast as I could, focusing my mana into my feet for speed.

She couldn't have gotten too far.

Soon, I caught sight of a carriage darting away in the distance.

"Luna…!"

Her name slipped from my lips as I continued to chase after the carriage.

The carriage picked up speed as I got closer.

I could've easily brought it to a stop with a punch or a spell, but I held back.

Luna was probably inside.

If I attacked the carriage, Luna could be hurt along with the enemies.

"First, I need to stop it…”

With renewed resolve, I continued my pursuit of the carriage.

Our gap between us diminished quickly, and before long, I was on it.

"Hup!"

With a swift jump, I found myself on top of the carriage.

"Ugh…”

The wind lashed at my face as the carriage kept its rapid pace.

I held on tightly to the carriage.

The driver, sensing an anomaly, twisted around to see me on the roof.

"What… What the!"

He blurted out, taken aback.

"Stop the carriage," I ordered.

Caught off guard, the driver stumbled and stuttered.

I shouted at him once again.

"Stop the carriage… ugh!"

-Whack!

Suddenly, a sword sliced through the roof of the carriage.

The blade brushed past my cheek.

Had it been just a smidge closer, it would've pierced through my jaw.

A voice echoed from inside the carriage.

"Keep running."

It was a voice I recognized - it was Carol, the butler.

"Ye, Yes!" The driver answered nervously.

"Huff…"

I took a deep breath.

"Ready for a round?"

I raised my fist, slamming it onto the carriage roof with a mana-infused punch.

The roof gave way, revealing Carol's sword inside the carriage, aimed straight at my throat.

It appeared he predicted my drop from the roof.

I grinned, raising my left arm.

-Clang!

"What?"

As my arm collided with the blade, the clashing of metal filled the air.

Carol's sword couldn't penetrate my arm.

Feeling proud, I mustered strength in my right hand.

"Is it my turn now?"

Before Carol could respond, my punch connected.

-Bang!!!

"Ughhh!"

My punch hit Carol's stomach.

The impact sent him flying backward, crashing through the back wall of the carriage.

"Phew!"

A voice echoed in my mind.

[Ugh, 'Guardian Spirit' means I absorb the hit instead. Be careful.]

It was Priscilla, complaining about the collision.

"Sorry, endure it for a bit."

I spoke to Priscilla, then shifted my focus to Luna.

"Luna, are you alright?"

She appeared to be unconscious.

First, I needed to get her off this carriage.

Carrying Luna, I jumped off the moving carriage.

Upon landing, I noticed a figure moving towards me.

It was Carol.

Despite being directly hit by me, he seemed to have recovered.

Perhaps, physical enhancement.

Considering he was likely a swordsman, the odds were high.

Gritting his teeth, Carol approached me.

"You damn brat…"

I gently placed Luna on the ground behind me.

Then, holding my ground, I locked eyes with Carol.

"I didn't like you from the moment I saw you."

I rolled my shoulders a few times, trying to alleviate the tension, then moved forward.

"Let's get this over with."

Carol, his gaze filled with venom, ran towards me.

"I'll crush you!"

But before he could reach me, a known voice echoed.

"Sylph. Shoot!"

"Huh?"

I stopped in my steps at the sound of that voice.

A voice I recognized uttering familiar words.

-Bang!

Following that, the sound of whipping wind filled the air and a tiny flame hurtled towards Carol.

"Ah."

Carol managed a startled gasp as he saw the flame bearing down on him.

-Kwaaaaaaang!

The flame mushroomed into a conflagration, surpassing the magic Anton had cast earlier.

Explosion magic.

The ferocious flames engulfed Carol.

"Haah… Haah…”

Heavy panting echoed from behind me.

I spun around.

A well-known face greeted me.

"Rie?"

As her name slipped from my lips, Rie exhaled and offered a small grin.

"Huff… Huff… I… came first, didn't I?"

Though Rie was struggling for breath, she still found the energy to laugh.

CHAPTER 76
RESPONSIBILITY (9)

"Phew... I thought I was going to die from exhaustion."

Rie caught her breath a little and muttered to herself.

I opened my mouth, looking at Rie.

"How did you get here?"

The information that could have led Rie here was severely lacking.

I was able to quickly figure it out because I knew about the Fred family, but Rie wasn't the same.

Even as a student council member, it would be impossible for her to know every detail about the academy.

When I asked that, Rie opened her mouth with a smile.

"Well, with Luna's sudden disappearance, you rushing off, and the dormitory fire, I put the pieces together with the information I had, and made a rough guess."

Puzzled, I stared at Rie.

"How did you learn Luna was missing?"

At this, Rie frowned.

"Didn't I tell you at lunch? I said I'd go warn Luna. But no matter how much I searched, I couldn't find Luna anywhere. Even Professor Mcguire was clueless."

That made sense.

Seeing me nod, Rie smirked.

"However, it looks like everything worked out without any major problems."

Just then, a loud cry came from where Carol had been.

"Damn brats…!!!!"

Rie and I looked his way.

The place was shrouded in dense smoke and fire due to Rie's explosive magic.

However, Carol was slowly emerging from the flames.

"Wow, he's sturdy~"

Rie snickered as she watched Carol.

Infuriated by her words, Carol gritted his teeth and shouted at us.

"Do you think I'll lose to brats like you!!!"

Upon hearing his cry, I walked forward.

"He's really tenacious."

His vitality was something even a cockroach would admire.

Normally, I would be irritated by it.

But not now.

Instead, I smiled.

"Actually, that's good."

I would be upset if it ended with just this.

Luna's abduction.

What would've happened if Luna was indeed kidnapped?

I didn't even want to think about it.

Just thinking of it made my teeth grind together.

I had no intention of forgiving that guy who attempted such an act, and the ones behind him as well.

Of course, if the situation ended like this, the royal family would handle it well, but I was not satisfied.

The feeling of defeating someone with my own hands is clearly different from someone else doing it for me.

I felt like I could only be relieved if I personally beat that guy up.

I glanced at Rie for a moment.

"Rie, take a rest. Look after Luna."

Rie glanced at me.

"Don't get hurt."

Rie said that, but she didn't seem too worried, maybe she had faith in me.

After smiling at Rie, I walked forward.

"Arghh!!"

Carol lifted his sword and started to charge at me.

"You're too slow."

I concentrated mana on my feet and stomped on the ground.

My body shot forward, and in an instant, I lunged towards Carol.

Using the momentum of my rush, I struck his abdomen.

-Thud!

"Ugh……!"

Without a moment to react, Carol took my hit, flew backwards and rolled on the ground.

His already burnt, disheveled clothes and hair became more chaotic as they rolled in the dirt.

"Cough! Cough!"

Carol spat out a cough while lying on the ground.

I walked towards the fallen Carol and opened my mouth.

"Stand up properly."

"This brat……!"

Carol glared at me as he struggled to his feet.

However, I wasn't scared at all.

I stomped on the ground again.

And kicked Carol, who was trying to get up.

-Smack!

"Ugh!"

Carol rolled back once more.

I opened my mouth again.

"I said, stand up properly."

"This damn psycho brat……!"

I stomped on the ground again.

This repeated several times.

Carol's body was in shambles.

Not to mention the several broken ribs, his face was covered in blood.

I carefully controlled my strength.

Enough to keep the opponent from fainting, to keep him in a state of pain.

I maintained that level.

Then Carol's eyes began to lose focus and his words changed.

"Please…… Stop…… Please stop……”

-Snap!

"AAAAAAHH!!!!"

I stomped hard on Carol's leg, who was begging for mercy.

I spoke with fury in my voice.

"You tried to kidnap a young girl, but you can't handle a few hits?"

"Ughh…… UGHHH!!!!"

"You don't think of the pain others feel yet you're so conscious of your own?"

"AHHHH!!!! Please!!! Please!!!!!!"

I continued to step on Carol's leg.

"Ugh…… Ugh……”

Carol shed tears and screamed.

However, seeing Carol begging for his life, I couldn't contain my anger and failed to control my strength.

Carol lost consciousness and collapsed right there.

His body lay there, covered in blood, unconscious.

However, seeing his chest rise and fall, it seemed like he was still alive.

"Hoo……”

I let out a breath.

A sigh of relief.

I've saved Luna, and the enemy was down.

The situation was mostly under control.

Now, all that's left is to handle the dormitory situation.

But I wasn't too worried.

The students were not weak, and it seemed the Fred family's main goal had been to kidnap Luna.

“Let's head back now.”

Just as I muttered to myself and turned towards Rie, I saw someone running from far away.

Seeing the figure, I assumed a combat stance again.

The speed of the approaching person was unusual.

"Huh?"

As the figure got closer, I could start to see the person's shape.

I tilted my head slightly.

It wasn't just one person.

There was someone riding on the back of the approaching figure.

And both had long hair fluttering in the wind.

I recognized who the person running was by the fluttering of their silver hair.

"Yeniel?"

Yeniel's silver hair was reflective in the moonlight.

It was easily identifiable at a glance.

But why was she suddenly here, and who was the person on her back?

Then I heard a voice.

"Rudy Astria!"

My eyes widened at the sound of that voice.

"Astina?"

No matter how I heard it, the voice belonged to Astina.

As they got closer, my suspicion turned into certainty.

The person being carried was dressed in the attire of a patient from the infirmary.

And the fluttering red hair.

It was Astina.

As Yeniel approached me, she gradually slowed down.

While being carried by Yeniel, Astina asked me.

"Hey, are you okay? No injuries anywhere?"

Astina looked me over.

"Ah, I'm fine. The situation is also somewhat under control…”

I said so, looking at Yeniel.

"Huff… huff… why do this to me really…”

She huffed and puffed with an aggrieved expression.

Astina then slapped Yeniel's back.

"Do you have a problem?"

Yeniel twisted around to look at Astina.

"I can help if it's a fight, but why call me just to carry you around?"

"I've been feeling faint from anemia recently, so running makes me dizzy. Plus, I'm much stronger than you, aren't I? It's better if I just use you as a mount and do the fighting myself."

Astina and Yeniel started bickering.

I awkwardly smiled as I watched them.

After watching their argument for a while, a question came to mind.

"More importantly, Astina, how did you know to come here?"

Astina stopped her bickering with Yeniel, gave me a smile, and said,

"Your friends, Ena and Riku, told me. They said you might need some help."

"Ah."

Now that I think about it, I had forgotten about Ena and Riku.

They must have gone straight to Astina.

I felt a mix of gratitude and a bit of guilt.

"But it looks like the situation is already over."

Astina said, looking around.

"Of course, since I arrived first."

Then Rie came walking from behind.

Behind Rie, Sylph was carrying Luna.

"So, Astina , you're second place? Second place? Hehe…"

Rie said, smiling.

She seemed oddly fixated on the ranking.

Technically, I was the first one to arrive here.

Doesn't that make me the first?

We all laughed and chatted for a while.

It seemed like everyone became talkative after the tension had dissipated.

After sorting out the situation a bit, I opened my mouth.

"Let's go back now."

I said, grinning at them.

Upon hearing this, Rie, Astina, and even Yeniel's expressions hardened.

Rie yelled out.

"Rudy, be careful!!!! Behind you!!!!"

"What?"

Surprised by her shout, I turned around.

A colossal sword was flying towards me from behind.

"Damn it…!"

Priscilla's Guardian Spirit had already been used up.

But, it was too close.

I raised my arm to block.

If I'm hit like this…

"Gravity!!!"

Then, Astina's voice came from behind.

The sword's movement stopped abruptly.

Astina had stopped the sword.

I stared at the suspended blade, a hair's breadth from my face.

"What… is this?"

It was an enormous sword, many times larger than my own body.

But how did such a sword fly towards me?

While I was pondering this, Astina quietly spat out.

"Vice Principal Oliver……"

"…Ah."

Upon hearing that, I understood what this sword was.

Oliver's metal magic.

It was the magic of Vice Principal Oliver, who can manipulate metal at will.

The sword in front of me disappeared and a man walking from a distance came into view.

That man was the vice principal of the academy.

It was Oliver.

CHAPTER 77
RESPONSIBILITY (10)

Just a little while ago, Oliver was patiently waiting outside the academy gate, his hood drawn up.

Even though he thought there would be no major issues with the plan, one could never be too certain.

Every incident came with its own variables.

However, he couldn't afford to monitor the situation from within the academy itself.

If he remained idle while various incidents took place inside the academy, everyone would inevitably grow suspicious of him.

Hiding near the academy's main gate, Oliver watched the events unfold inside.

Suddenly, he spotted a carriage approaching from a distance.

Yet, the state of the carriage was far from satisfactory - it was visibly damaged.

The face of the coachman was drained of color.

"Did they fail?"

He clenched his fist in frustration,

"Can't they even manage to sneak out one single student?"

His mind flitted to Carol - that overconfident butler from the Fred family.

From the start, Oliver had not taken a liking to him.

Oliver took off his hood and continued to watch the scene unfold.

When the carriage reached the main gate, the guards blocked its path.

"Who goes there!"

One of the guards pointed his spear at the coachman,

"The gate cannot be opened without permission, neither for entrance nor exit."

This threw the coachman into confusion.

Carol, who should have been in the carriage, was not there.

The coachman had been driving forward simply out of the desire to survive.

"I, I, umm…"

He stuttered, unable to explain himself.

"Identify yourself! Who are you!"

The guard shouted at him.

Just then, there was a sound of someone knocking on the iron gate from outside.

The guards, startled by the noise, turned towards the source of the sound.

"Isn't it a bit excessive to threaten like that? You might scare someone into silence."

Came a familiar voice.

"It's Vice Principal Oliver!"

The guards saw a man dressed impeccably in a suit.

It was Oliver.

The sight of the Vice Principal left them taken aback.

Oliver smiled amiably and lightly knocked on the closed iron gate.

"I've left something in the Vice Principal's office. Could you open the gate for me?"

"Ah, yes! Understood!"

The guards, setting aside the issue with the carriage for the moment, began to open the gate.

As long as the academy staff logged their entry in the records, they could freely enter and exit.

As the gate creaked open, Oliver's smile vanished and he began to channel his mana.

The spear tips of the guards melted away.

"What…?"

The guards were left dumbstruck.

The molten spear tips transformed into bullets and flew straight towards the guards' heads.

"Gah!"

"Argh!"

The guards were caught off guard, without proper helmets.

They had no choice but to take the direct hit.

Rendered unconscious by the impact, they crumpled to the ground.

The coachman gaped at the scene, shocked.

Oliver turned his icy gaze towards him.

"Where is Carol?"

-

Oliver trudged his way into the academy.

As he moved deeper inside, voices started to reach his ears.

The noise originated from Rudy Astria and a few others who were chattering away.

Sighing heavily, Oliver cast a stern gaze in their direction.

"Haa……”

He had just finished searching the carriage, but there was nothing left inside.

Neither Luna, nor Levian's spellbook, not even the letter he had written was there.

A letter with his seal, meant for the Fred family.

If others were to discover this letter, the whole truth behind this incident would be exposed.

Yet, it was already in the hands of those students ahead.

He had no other choice.

He would knock those kids down.

And seize the letter from them.

Even so, the fact that he instigated this matter couldn't be hidden.

Once he had set foot inside, he had braced himself for at least that much.

But, he had another goal in mind.

Oliver intended to flee with Levian's spellbook and Luna.

The Astria family was already aware of that spellbook.

Undoubtedly, they would be searching for him.

Knowing the Astria family, they would understand its value.

"Hmm…”

His gaze fell on Astina.

And he looked over the others by her side.

Rie Von Ristonia, Rudy Astria, Luna Railer and… the silver-haired brat whose name he didn't quite remember.

"I can't kill them."

If even one of them were to die, the Empire would be shaken.

None of them could be touched.

Though he could do something to the silver-haired brat, she was currently carrying Astina.

In attempting to kill her, he might accidentally kill Astina as well.

So he couldn't act recklessly.

However…

"Perhaps I can handle that Rudy Astria."

Ian might be a bit troubled, but if he secured Levian's spellbook, they might think it was worth it.

Oliver started to gather mana in his hand.

The surrounding iron bars and various metal objects melted away.

These metal pieces gathered together, forming a massive sword.

Oliver gestured with his hand.

The massive sword flew towards Rudy.

-

With a resounding thud, the gigantic black sword hit the ground.

Ignoring the fallen sword, our eyes were solely focused on Vice Principal Oliver standing far away.

Yeniel broke the silence,

"Running seems like a good idea, don't you think?"

I had to agree with her.

Our opponent was the Vice Principal.

He was not someone we could confront.

"What a shame… It's just one mountain after another."

I sighed.

The problem was that the mountain we were facing now was insurmountably steep compared to the ones we had climbed so far.

We stood absolutely no chance against Vice Principal Oliver.

Even if we were far superior to an average student, it made no difference.

Students were students, professors were professors.

And Oliver was a Vice Principal, leading even among the professors.

We couldn't possibly win.

So, should we choose to flee?

That wasn't a solution either.

Rather, fleeing might be the worse option.

Because after running for a while, we would inevitably get caught.

I looked towards Oliver and asked Astina,

"What should we do?"

"I don't know. Since there's a fire in the dormitory, the professors will come eventually."

"So you're saying we should hold out until then?"

"We have no other choice."

Astina clenched her teeth.

"The problem is, we don't know when the professors will arrive."

I took a quick glance at Astina's face.

Her expression held a hint of subtle despair.

Despair for an unbeatable entity.

But we had to fight even if we knew we would lose.

"Why don't you stop whispering among yourselves and speak with me instead?"

Oliver slowly walked towards us as he spoke.

"Hand over Luna Railer and the spellbook she carries. If you do so, I'll let you go."

I stepped forward and retorted,

"Please don't talk nonsense, Vice Principal."

"What?"

I looked Oliver in the eye as I continued,

"What do you plan to do by taking away a young girl like this? Haven't you already risen high enough? How far will your greed go?"

I could feel my fist clenching.

"Do you truly believe a position earned through such disgraceful means would hold any worth?"

Upon hearing my words, Oliver's face, initially brimming with rage, gradually relaxed into a smirk.

"You understand nothing."

He said, pointing to the sky.

"Those who don't strive to rise are simply bound to fall to the ground."

Then, he pointed to his own eyes.

"I've seen it with my own eyes, their fall and despair, their crumbling forms."

Oliver's eyes bore a certain fire.

They were filled with various emotions, but there was one emotion that stood out to me.

Rage.

Rage ignited by a thirst for revenge.

"Those who don't reach the sky are destined to fall to the ground."

I was taken aback.

There was only one reason they had fallen.

"Isn't that because they are blinded by their ambitions?"

Could they have been truly satisfied once they reached their desired destination?

Would they have stopped there?

"Have you not considered the possibility of another sky above the one you see?"

I said to Oliver.

"Let's stop this now."

I suggested, glancing briefly at Astina and Rie.

"Hahaha. You're telling me to stop here?"

Oliver burst out laughing, like a man unhinged.

"How about suggesting I end my life since it's all over anyway? Or perhaps, assassinate the Emperor? Is that what you're hinting at when you mention a sky beyond the one we see?"

With these words, mana began to gather in Oliver's hand.

Sparks crackled and hissed on the massive sword that Astina had deflected, melting it down.

The molten metal began to gather towards Oliver.

Oliver quietly opened his mouth.

"Seems like we've sidetracked a bit."

As soon as Oliver uttered these words, Rie and Astina stretched out their hands.

"Gravity!!!"

"Fire Sphere!!!"

Both of them cast their magic simultaneously.

We never had the illusion that Oliver would change his mind.

The conversation was merely a distraction, a strategy to induce his carelessness.

Upon seeing their spells, Oliver curtly uttered,

"Barrier."

At his words, a transparent shield appeared around him.

-Zzzzzzt!!!!

"Uh…!"

Their magic collided with the transparent barrier Oliver had created, producing an eerie, spine-chilling noise.

I watched the scene unfold, blocking my ears.

"What…"

The barrier Oliver created.

Rie and Astina's magic was easily deflected by that single barrier.

And when the magic was mostly dissipated, Oliver released his barrier and opened his mouth.

"Well, I appreciate your efforts."

-Zzzzzp!!!!!

"Kyaa!"

"Eek!!!"

From behind me, screams erupted from Rie, Yeniel, and even Astina.

Alarmed by the noise, I turned around to see dozens of blades emerging from the ground.

With a slight movement, we could be sliced by those blades.

Within an instant, we were pinned in place.

"What…"

As I turned to look at Oliver, there was no sign of the liquefied metal.

While he was defending against Rie and Astina's attack, all the molten metal had

already seeped into the ground.

As I stood there dumbfounded, Oliver spoke again.

"Rudy Astria."

I looked at Oliver, and in front of me, the molten metal rose, slowly taking the shape of a sword.

Oliver smirked.

"Cut off your arm with this, and I'll spare the others."

“…What?"

"To make up for the annoyance you caused, I think it's fair to take your arm."

I stared at the sword.

An absurd proposition.

Even if I cut off my arm with this sword, our lives still hang by his whims.

A one-sided loss.

However…

I found myself fixated on the sword.

And so, I bent over to reach for the sword on the ground.

-Clang!

"Why are you listening to such nonsense?"

Someone next to me kicked the sword lying on the ground.

There was no sign of him, no sound, but there he was, right beside me.

"Ah, damn it. I was about to head home and have a drink."

I looked to the side.

An unkempt man with a scruffy beard, looking like a thug.

His hair was in a mess.

He wore a suit befitting a professor, but his buttons were undone, and he wore it casually.

But still, when it came to teaching, he did so with sincerity.

"You're taking this fight with the kids too seriously, aren't you?"

It was Robert.

CHAPTER 78
RESPONSIBILITY (11)

"Hey, hold this for me."

Robert tossed me a bottle he had been holding.

"What is this…"

I examined the bottle.

A transparent bottle containing a brown liquid.

It was a very finely crafted bottle.

"It's liquor. It's pricey, so be careful with it."

Suddenly, liquor…?

I was a bit confused, but given the situation, I quickly regained my composure.

"Look who we have here. If it isn't the Empire's outcast, Robert."

Robert loosened the tie casually tied around his neck and threw it on the floor.

"It beats being a disposable asset. At least I wasn't abandoned because of my abilities."

Upon hearing that, a vein pulsed on Oliver's forehead.

"Is that right?"

Oliver reached out and began to manipulate mana.

"Then try blocking everything."

With a flash, electricity sparked from the blade aimed at Astina.

The blade attempted to move.

However, Robert moved his hand first.

Then, the blades shattered into pieces and fell to the floor.

"What……”

Astina opened her eyes wide at the sight.

Robert definitely didn't manipulate mana.

Yet, he shattered the blade.

I, too, found it hard to understand what happened.

Despite my studies in dark magic, I had never seen such magic before.

Robert calmly spat out a command.

"Guard the kids."

Suddenly, the ground started to rumble.

"What… what is this!"

Then, a massive figure started to rise from the ground.

"Ah!!!"

I gazed dumbfoundedly at the sight.

It looked like an elephant.

However, the energy it emitted was anything but ordinary.

A very sticky black aura.

I felt an uncomfortable yet familiar aura from it.

Seeing this, Oliver laughed.

"Do you think you can fight properly while protecting these brats?"

Robert responded to Oliver's pathetic taunt with a laugh.

"I am different from someone like you who was stuck in the academy doing only research."

"Heh…… Why did such an experienced person like you leave your son to die?"

Left his son to die?

The story I heard from someone else was that Robert had killed his son.

But hearing something slightly different, my eyes widened in shock.

No, more than that, if Robert heard that, he would definitely react badly……

Contrary to my fears, Robert was just calmly manipulating mana.

"It's surprising that you have reached this far and yet you know nothing."

He didn't show much reaction, but one thing was clear.

Robert was extremely angry.

Robert usually talks a lot, fussing about this and that.

But the current atmosphere was very different.

A murderous aura was emanating from him, that could slice anyone it touched.

“But you're prepared since you brought it up, right?”

As soon as Robert said that, a red gleam started to glow in his eyes.

"Defier of the Divine, descend."

A swirling black energy began to rise behind Robert.

This energy started to form the shape of a demon.

A figure with black skin and two horns on its forehead.

It was not human in appearance.

It resembled a beast more than anything.

The demon floated up behind Robert, as if it lacked legs like a ghost.

As the demon revealed itself, Oliver did not simply stand by watching.

As Oliver clenched his fist, the surroundings began to tremble.

-Kuugooong.

All the iron in the vicinity began to melt, breaking down into sharp fragments like shards of glass.

Thousands, hundreds of these shards.

No, even more shards began to appear around him.

"Steel Control."

Zzzzzzt! As he said these words, the iron shards sparked with electricity and began to fly towards Robert.

However, Robert did not move at all.

He simply uttered one word calmly.

"Demon Howling."

Then, the demon floating behind Robert looked up at the sky.

-Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!!!

The demon let out a roar.

The roar was no ordinary sound.

As the demon roared, the movement of all the iron shards around it stopped.

"Urgh……!"

A powerful shockwave also resonated towards us.

However, that shockwave was blocked immediately.

The elephant standing next to us was blocking that shockwave.

Feeling that something was wrong, Oliver immediately cast a spell.

"Ugh……! Barrier!!!"

Oliver quickly cast a spell to block the shockwave.

However, all the iron shards flying towards Robert were sent flying far away.

Seeing this, Oliver quickly began to gather mana in his hand to cast another spell.

Before Oliver could cast his spell, Robert calmly uttered a phrase.

"You're too slow."

Robert reached Oliver in an instant.

"You might be a superior researcher compared to me……"

Robert raised his fist.

"But you're not a fighter."

As he swung his fist, Robert cast a spell.

"Punch of Ruin."

"Ba, barrier!!!!!!!"

Seeing Robert's fist, Oliver quickly cast a spell.

Robert's fist connected with Oliver's barrier.

Crack.

"Wha… What."

A crack appeared in the barrier.

Robert exerted more force into his fist, pushing forward.

Crunch… Snap… Crackle.

"Thi…”

Slowly, the entire barrier began to crack.

And then it shattered.

"This crazy……”

Oliver couldn't hide the shock on his face as he watched the scene.

And when the barrier shattered, Robert's fist continued to move, making contact with Oliver.

"Cough!!!!!!!!"

Robert's fist accurately struck Oliver in the stomach.

With the impact of Robert's punch on Oliver's stomach, a huge flame burst forth.

-Kwooooooooom!!!!!!!!!

"Wha… What……”

Black flames.

They were enormous.

The flames resulted in an explosion so vast that it covered the surroundings.

The magnitude was unlike anything we had seen in our previous battles.

This was not on par with Rie's explosive magic.

It was far beyond.

Engulfed by the flames, Oliver was thrown into the air.

However, he didn't lose consciousness.

“Kuh…!”

From within Oliver's clothes, a concealed necklace emerged.

The necklace shattered, preserving his life.

“It's not over…!”

Midair, Oliver extended his hand once more towards Robert.

Immediately, the nearby fragments of metal rushed back towards Robert.

Robert calmly uttered a spell.

“Demon Barrier.”

Behind him, a phantom demon overlaid his figure.

The hazy form of the demon combined with Robert, and the oncoming shards of metal started to embed themselves into the demon's body.

However, the demon didn't flinch.

While the demon and Robert shared the same body, shielding him from the iron onslaught, small contusions formed where the iron pieces deeply lodged into the demon.

But these scratches couldn't inflict any harm on Robert.

“Do you really think you can achieve anything with just some metal manipulation magic?”

Robert spat out cold words.

The limits of a researcher.

A magic researcher paves new paths, acting as a trailblazer.

However, Robert was closer to a combatant than a researcher.

A person who comprehends multiple fields, devising strategies for confronting opponents.

Even though Oliver had higher authority in research, he was no match for Robert in battle.

After all, combat was Robert's expertise.

Robert reached out his hand towards Oliver, who was falling from the sky.

“Demon Fury.”

The demon overlaid with Robert also stretched its hand towards Oliver, mimicking Robert.

From the demon's hand, a black sphere emerged and ascended into the sky.

That black sphere headed straight for Oliver.

“Barrier!!! Barrier!!!!!!! Steel Control!!!!!”

Upon seeing the sphere, Oliver yelled in desperation.

All the metal shards flocked to Oliver, forming a protective cover around his body and layers of barriers emerged around him.

Looking at this, Robert scoffed.

“Just that?”

The black sphere kept rising and Oliver kept falling.

Oliver, encased in a spherical shield made of barriers and metal.

And the black sphere created by Robert.

Inevitably, the two spheres collided.

-Crash!

As the black sphere touched Oliver, it emitted a column of black energy.

The column, resembling a long spike, penetrated through Oliver's barrier, the protective layer of metal, and extended into the sky.

“Keuk……”

The spike precisely impaled Oliver's abdomen.

Then, the demon and Robert, who had been extending their hands, simultaneously clenched them into fists.

At that moment, spikes sprouted from the original spike.

Dozens of branching spikes penetrated Oliver's entire body.

"Cough…!"

Vice-Principal Oliver's last words.

He spat out blood with such a sound.

"Hu…!"

Robert exhaled sharply, watching the scene unfold.

Immediately, the demon overlapping with Robert dissipated like smoke, and the spikes piercing through Oliver also disappeared.

Oliver dropped straight from the sky, hitting the ground with a thud.

Following this, the elephant that had been protecting us also vanished into thin air, like dust.

Robert, wavered for a moment, coughing.

"Cough…"

"Professor Robert!"

I rushed over to him without hesitation.

Blood was mixed in with Robert's cough.

Even though he didn't seem to be severely injured, he was coughing up blood.

"Are you okay?"

I ran to Robert and propped him up.

Seeing this, Robert frowned at me.

"Don't ruin the cool ending…"

At Robert's grumbling, I couldn't help but smile.

Robert also mustered a weary grin.

"You were amazing, teacher."

I told Robert with a grin on my face.

CHAPTER 79
WINTER BALL (1)

"Still, the situation is somewhat under control."

After Oliver collapsed and some time had passed, various professors, including Professor Cromwell and Professor McGuire, hurried into the academy.

They quickly took control, subduing the violent Oliver and apprehending Anton, who had been acting with him.

However, it didn't seem necessary to do so.

Oliver had already suffered such significant injuries that he was as good as dead.

And Anton was…

"Ah… Uh…"

His eyes were rolled back, and he was in a half-conscious state.

He was so broken down that he could not even hold a proper conversation.

Certainly, he was not in this state when I spoke to him.

But, looking at his severely wrecked state, I tilted my head.

How did he end up like that?

It was not the time to worry about this for now.

I had to get to the dormitory.

I suspect that these guys are behind the fire at the dormitory as well, and I had to protect the students.

However, the situation there was already over.

"Ah, Rudy Astria has arrived."

Borval greeted me as I arrived in front of the dormitory.

Beside him, Locke scowled as if he didn't like something.

"What happened?"

Professor Cromwell took the lead and asked Borval.

Then, Borval pointed to a corner with several professors watching.

In that corner, there were people tied up, unconscious.

Borval handed a pouch to the professors.

"It seems they used this magical tool to chase the students away."

Inside the pouch was a large bead.

It was a magical tool containing guidance magic.

Borval explained the situation while showing the bead.

To summarize, they had staged an incident to drive the students out of the dormitory.

They burned dry twigs to make it look like a fire had broken out.

Then they used this bead.

This bead induced the students to leave the dormitory.

Of course, the magic tool was not powerful enough to control the students at will.

It merely instilled the notion that they had to escape from here, and drove all the people who did not doubt it out of the dormitory.

This notion was more readily accepted because of the previous library fire.

However, Locke was skeptical of this and shook off the magic.

This magic can be easily dispelled with a single doubt, so it didn't work on Locke.

So, Locke was the first to go upstairs and start fighting with those mercenaries.

While he was fighting the mercenaries, Borval arrived and swept the rest away.

So that's why Locke was making that face…

He wore a sulky expression, like a wolf that had its food stolen.

Still, everyone relaxed, knowing the situation was completely under control.

However, there was just one person who frowned.

It was Cromwell.

"It's going to be chaotic for a while."

Predicting the troubles that would arise in the absence of the Vice-Principal and Principal, he let out a sigh.

-

A few days after the academy attack incident.

At the heart of the empire, the Royal Palace.

Many people had gathered in the Royal Palace.

Among them, the one that stood out was Ian Astria.

These days, Perrian Astria, the head of the Astria family, had been absent.

Rumors circulated that he was gradually preparing for retirement and leaving all matters to his successor, Ian Astria.

And today.

Today was the day of the conference regarding the incident at the academy.

This was not a trivial meeting.

The academy was where the children of the nobles representing the empire were.

The news that such a place had been in danger meant that the empire's future had nearly faltered.

And there's a possibility that such a danger could happen again.

Rie, the heir to the empire, was also at the scene, making it impossible for the incident to be dismissed lightly.

Therefore, the empire deemed this meeting of great importance.

With Ian Astria at such a place, people couldn't help but focus on him.

Essentially, the head of the family not appearing at such an important place meant nothing short of passing on the position to his heir.

Inside the Royal Palace, in the conference room.

A multitude of nobles were present.

Despite the Emperor not having entered yet, no one dared to utter a word.

They all recognized the gravity of the situation and refrained from making casual remarks.

A man broke the silence.

"Ian Astria, it's been a while."

The man standing closest to the emperor's seat.

The prime minister of the empire.

It was Jason Ophillius, the head of the Duke Ophillius family.

Although he looked old enough to have a full head of white hair, his dignity was so impressive that no one could dismiss him.

Jason, in this serious atmosphere, spoke with a smile.

"Is your father doing well?"

However, no one shushed him.

If the Astria family is said to possess independent power, then the Ophillius family was the symbol of the empire.

A family that boasts of endless loyalty to the emperor.

No one could tell the head of such a family that the situation was serious and to exercise restraint.

Ian frowned at Jason's question and responded.

"Yes."

"Hoho, so he told you to attend the meeting and see some faces instead? I was hoping to share a drink with Perrian after so long…"

Jason said with a hearty laugh.

"Then, would you relay a message?"

As Jason spoke, the laughter disappeared in an instant.

He opened his mouth with a look that had completely lost its laughter.

"Manage your people properly."

At Jason's words, all the nobles present felt a chill.

No one had dared to say this.

The Fred family, who had caused the accident this time, was an unquestionable 'dog' following the Astria family to anyone's eyes.

However, no evidence against the Astria family emerged from this incident.

So, the incident was seen not as a conspiracy by the noble faction but as a plot between the Fred family and Oliver, their associate.

Despite the situation, all the nobles were aware.

They were certain that the Astria family was involved as well.

It was implausible for the Fred family to single-handedly instigate an event that could overturn the Empire.

Jason pointed out this part in a public place.

So, the other nobles had no choice but to be flustered.

Upon hearing Jason's words, Ian opened his eyes sharply.

Then, Jason let out a pleasant laugh.

"Just a joke, a joke. Heh heh. This old man gets scared when young people stare at him like that."

While he was laughing, the guard at the door shouted.

"Entrance of the Empire's sun, the Empire's light, His Majesty the Emperor."

At that, all the nobles in the meeting room bowed their heads towards the door.

The door opened and the Emperor with a long beard appeared.

Behind him was a middle-aged man with a sizable stature, wearing glasses.

The Principal of the Academy, McDowell Cliver, was there.

The Emperor walked through the nobles and ascended to the throne, while McDowell found a place among the nobles.

"Now, let us start the conference."

-

"It's been a while, McDowell."

As soon as the meeting ended, Duke Jason Ophillius approached McDowell.

"You've been busy these days, haven't you? The Academy demands a lot of your time."

"Not at all. If anyone is busy, it would be you, Duke Ophillius."

McDowell replied, his head bowed toward Jason.

"Ho-ho, what could an old man like me be doing?"

Jason spoke, his cheerful laughter ringing out.

"Hasn't it been a while since you visited the academy yourself?"

"Ah, yes. I've had some things to attend to recently regarding the rebels."

"Oh? The rebels you say."

Jason stroked his chin at McDowell's words.

Once McDowell confirmed that no one else was around, he carefully opened his mouth.

"I've been tasked with overseeing someone involved with the Rebels, which has me quite concerned."

At this, Jason clapped his hands and responded.

"Ah, His Majesty the Emperor did mention something about it."

McDowell simply nodded.

The fact that McDowell was in charge of Yeniel was a secret known to almost no one

other than the Emperor.

Anything related to the Rebels was a matter the Emperor was intently focused on.

So, it was the right decision to keep as much information as possible hidden.

The reason why they didn't explicitly inform Jason and used McDowell instead was also to hide these affairs.

Most nobles had an easy time tracking schedules, but McDowell's was difficult to discern and few paid it much attention.

Being the principal of the Academy always required a certain level of mystery.

For the safety of the Academy, his power and activities must remain unknown.

That way, no one would dare invade the Academy casually.

After a moment's laughter, Jason cautiously broke the silence.

"So… have you found a vice-principal yet?"

McDowell awkwardly smiled before replying,

"There is someone I have in mind."

"Oh, good to hear. Who is it?"

"Well, I can't be certain. The person in question might not accept."

“…They would decline the vice-principal's position?"

Jason questioned, his face showing confusion.

"Well, this friend is not too ambitious… and also…”

"And?"

McDowell scratched his head.

"His wife is rather strict, she might not allow it."

“…Hoho, I see. A caring wife, it seems."

"I suppose so."

"So who is the poor man? Do I know him?"

McDowell nodded.

"It's Cromwell, Charles Cromwell."

-

In a dark space.

"Cough."

The death rattle of a man echoed.

And then, a cold voice rang out.

"Pathetic creature."

It was a beautiful voice.

However, it was difficult to consider it a pleasant voice as it was laced with hostility and sharpness.

"Just for failing to capture a single person, you're in such a state."

The man who voiced those words swept back his glossy black hair in what appeared to be annoyance, his brows furrowing.

"That one seems to have been quite a challenge."

The man with black hair dusted off the blood on his sword and took a seat.

Then he called out to someone nearby.

"Bring Yeniel. Fetch Yeniel for me."

"Y-Yeniel, sir? But Yeniel is currently on a mission at the academy…"

The man with black hair looked up, his gaze falling upon the one who answered.

"I-I'm sorry!!! Very sorry!!! I'll… I'll fetch her right away!!!"

With just one glance from the man, he quickly bowed his head in fear.

With a sigh of discontent, the black-haired man pulled a cigarette from his pocket.

After taking a puff, he opened his mouth.

"Go fetch her."

"Understood!!!"

The man responded loudly and ran out.

The black-haired man took another puff from his cigarette, gazing up at the ceiling.

CHAPTER 80
WINTER BALL (2)

Student Council Room.

I was having a conversation with Yeniel and Astina.

"So you're saying Yeniel has been summoned?"

I asked, my face showing surprise.

"Yeah, a letter arrived through a bird yesterday."

So far, there had been no word from The Rebels, so their movements were unknown.

Yeniel had merely been biding her time by sending useless information to The Rebels.

After all, Yeniel's reason for coming to the academy was to assassinate Rie and me.

Since that plan had already failed, there was nothing they could ask of Yeniel.

As a result, all Yeniel heard was to hide in the academy without revealing her affiliation with them.

But when she was just twiddling her thumbs, finally, a new instruction came.

A letter carried by a bird.

That letter was a command from the leader of The Rebels.

"Why would the leader suddenly call for you?"

"I'm not sure either. Since they asked me to come, I guess I should."

At my words, Yeniel shrugged her shoulders.

The leader of The Rebels.

She said that she doesn't know exactly who he is.

Of course, I knew who he was.

A man with black hair who breaks and kills everything that stands in his way, slicing people apart with his absurd swordsmanship.

He's a man known as the Tyrant of the Battlefield.

There's no need to meet him now, but it was about time something happened.

"However, the sudden summons could mean they've discovered your double-agent status, couldn't it?"

Astina looked at Yeniel with a worried expression.

Astina wasn't one to be overly concerned about Yeniel, but it seemed she'd grown fond of her after spending some time together.

Yeniel relaxed her expression as if to say it was okay and opened her mouth.

"I doubt that would happen. Considering his character, if there were a traitor, he wouldn't call them aside but kill them instantly."

I agreed with her thoughts.

That tyrant wouldn't have left a traitor alive.

Upon hearing this, Astina asked,

"Then why is he calling you?"

"There must be some business. I'll have to go there to know exactly."

Yeniel said this and took out a sheet of paper.

"This is a document stating that my parents are in critical condition."

Astina accepted the document.

It seemed like she was going to apply for a leave of absence with this document.

"So, we won't see you for a while."

Even though we hadn't spent much time together, it was still sad to hear her leave without a definite return date.

At my words, Yeniel faintly smiled and responded,

"I guess I won't be back until the final exams are over."

But there was something else that concerned me.

"Did you tell Evan?"

Evan.

Recently, I hadn't seen Yeniel and Evan together.

Usually, I'd see them together once in a while, but recently, they were only seen separately.

"Ah, I've been fighting with that guy recently…"

"Fighting?"

I expressed my doubts at Yeniel's words.

"Sometime ago, I started to feel like he was changing. We had a bit of a quarrel."

"Evan has changed?"

At my question, Yeniel paused for a moment before speaking.

"He used to feel so foolishly considerate towards those around him… but nowadays, it seems a bit different……"

Yeniel said and gave an awkward laugh.

"Well, it might just be my misunderstanding. I'll go check on him."

Yeniel paused as she headed out, stopping to look back at me.

"Rudy Astria. Be careful while I'm away. The Rebels despise nobles, especially the Astria family, who can be considered the leaders of the nobility."

I nodded in understanding.

The meaning behind her words was clear.

Ian of the Astria family, or its head, is not someone the Rebels could touch.

But I was a different story.

I'm still weak.

So in Yeniel's absence, it was possible that the Rebels might target me.

"Well, I'm off now."

With that, Yeniel walked out of the room.

Watching her retreating figure, my gaze then turned towards Astina.

"Have you been feeling better lately?"

It had been a while since Astina was discharged from the hospital.

Her complexion was much better than when she had fainted, but I couldn't help but worry.

"With the principal back, my workload has lightened up, so I'm fine. Thanks for your concern."

Astina smiled at me.

Seeing her like that put me at ease.

As she put away the documents Yeniel had given her, she asked me a question.

"Are you preparing well for the final exams?"

"I've been studying as usual."

I shrugged my shoulders.

The final exam period was approaching quickly.

With so many major events happening, it felt like it was coming faster than usual.

Although I said I was studying as usual, I was actually paying quite a bit more attention to these final exams.

The midterms we had before didn't differentiate much and some subjects didn't even have exams, so they didn't weigh heavily.

Because there were subjects that didn't even have exams, our midterm grades weren't even posted.

Since I didn't know my ranking based on the midterm grades, the final exam was really important.

"Alright, then I'll be watching this time."

Astina said seriously.

It seemed like she was referring to the 'responsibility' she mentioned before.

In other words, she was telling me to come in first place.

“…I'll consider it."

I couldn't give a definitive answer to Astina's words.

All I could do was contemplate her words.

I was worried about Evan's changes that Yeniel mentioned, and about the things that might happen next.

The recent actions of the vice-principal.

I've known since before that the future was changing, but most things still went as they originally did.

However, this time was different.

I had certainly manipulated things so that Anton and Evan wouldn't meet during the joint practical.

So originally, there shouldn't have been any opportunity for the vice-principal to interfere.

But an incident did happen.

The future had been twisted.

Of course, the cause was different.

Levian's Spellbook, in Luna's possession.

Because of that Spellbook, the incident occurred.

From what I knew, this Spellbook was merely a magical tool that gave Luna strong abilities, without knowing the backstory.

Because it wasn't mentioned anywhere.

But, through this incident, it became clear.

This Spellbook wasn't something that people could simply leave alone.

It was an item worth enough to risk their own families.

And its past was intricately intertwined with many people……

My goal was survival, but I tried to survive without causing harm to others.

However, now the people around me started to get hurt due to the future I've changed.

I felt a sense of responsibility.

Astina, who had collapsed, Luna, who almost got kidnapped.

They were the ones who got hurt due to the changed story because of me.

Of course, someone might say there's no need to feel this way.

Since I didn't intend to harm anyone directly.

But I didn't want to use such a defense mechanism.

For a while, I could be comfortable, but I was afraid of what would follow.

The failure to prepare for incidents by avoiding them, and the people around me suffering significant harm.

I was too afraid of these things.

So instead of resorting to such a defense mechanism, I wanted to face the situation head-on.

I looked straight at Astina.

"Even if I can't secure the first place…"

Smiling softly as I looked at Astina, I said.

"I will take full 'responsibility'."

-

In Professor Cromwell's lab.

Though everyone felt relieved when Principal McDowell returned, one person was even more troubled than usual.

That person was Cromwell.

"Ugh…"

'Hey, I've marked my duty shifts on the calendar in my lab. Take care of them for me.

Also, do my paperwork.'

The words Robert had said from his hospital bed.

Robert suffered severe injuries from his previous fight with Vice Principal Oliver.

Robert's magic has overwhelming power, but it wears away at his own body.

Even without receiving direct damage, his internal injuries were severe.

Now that Robert had been hospitalized, his responsibilities and duties fell onto Cromwell.

Of course, McDowell, who felt sorry for him, took some of the work, but there was an even bigger problem.

The words that Principal McDowell said to him in person:

'Professor Cromwell, could you take on the role of Vice Principal?'

"What… that's preposterous!"

Cromwell recalled that moment, and let out a cry as he stared at the ceiling.

He continued to think.

'If you decline, I understand… In that case, could you at least act as Vice Principal for now? Also…

Try it for a bit and let me know again in a month. There will probably be… a faculty meeting to allocate the annual research fund in about a month… '

"This… this is blatant blackmail……"

But he could not refuse.

The privileges that Principal McDowell had been granting him all this time.

Professor Cromwell received a much larger research fund than the other professors.

Of course, he brought appropriate research results every year.

However, it was undeniable that McDowell had been giving Cromwell preferential treatment.

"The research fund…"

If cigarettes and alcohol were Cromwell's soul, then research was his lifelong friend.

Being unable to research properly was like losing his best friend.

"Ughh!!!"

Surely, if he is promoted to Vice Principal, his free time will be reduced.

And then…

"Sophie will scold me…"

Sophie was Cromwell's wife.

More than losing his personal time, Cromwell was afraid of the scolding he would get from his wife.

"Haah……."

Cromwell let out a sigh and glanced at the shelf beside him.

"Should I have a drink…?"

His hidden stash of alcohol.

He had kept just one bottle hidden in a corner, in case Sophie came to the lab.

Alcohol reserved for stressful days like today.

After a moment of hesitation, Cromwell stood up and began rummaging through the shelf.

"Hmm…?"

However, there was no way the alcohol could be there.

That's because Robert had taken it for himself.

"This… this is odd."

Unaware of this fact, Cromwell could only search the shelf in confusion.

CHAPTER 81
WINTER BALL (3)

"Hmm…”

Luna sat on her dorm room bed, deep in thought.

"A ball…”

A short while earlier, she had been chatting with Ena.

In their conversation, she discovered something new.

- Luna, you know there's a ball after the finals, right?

This was news to Luna.

A ball that is held after all the academy's schedules are over.

Luna, who was focused solely on her studies, did not know of this.

- And you absolutely must be the first to dance! With Rudy!

"But…”

Luna had never danced before.

She hadn't had a chance to attend a ball because she hadn't been properly introduced to society.

She had learned to dance, sure.

But she'd never danced with a partner before.

"Dancing with… Rudy…”

She began to picture it.

Underneath the sparkling chandelier, she and Rudy danced, both of them dressed elegantly.

They exchanged smiles and held each other close, feeling the warmth of one another's bodies.

Then, she felt Rudy's breath and their faces were close…

"Uh…"

She stopped her imagination and looked at her reflection in the mirror nearby.

It showed her flushed face.

"Pervert…"

She muttered, covering her red cheeks with her hands.

Despite this, she kept thinking about Ena's last words.

-The couple who dances first at the ball is said to promise eternal love.

This claim was based on a romance novel set in the Liberion Academy.

"Eternal love…"

Just as Luna was about to sink into a daydream inspired by Ena's words,

Knock, knock.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes!!!!"

The knock startled Luna, causing her to yell out.

"Luna, can I come in?"

It was Rudy's voice from outside.

"Uh, uh, uh!!! Come on in!!"

Hearing Rudy, Luna quickly tidied her hair.

As Luna was getting ready, Rudy entered the room with a puzzled expression.

He looked around.

"What happened?"

In response to Rudy's question, Luna waved her hands.

"Ah, ah, no! Nothing at all!"

He sensed something odd, he shrugged anyway and sat down on a chair next to the bed.

"Then let's study."

-

After Luna was hospitalized and woke up, many people came to visit.

At that time, Rudy offered to tutor her.

He insisted, wanting to return the favor for when Luna had helped Rudy during his own hospitalization.

She didn't mind Rudy's suggestion to study at all.

She was simply thrilled to have more time with Rudy.

He began pulling out some handouts,

"Well, let's start with the liberal arts subjects."

"Okay!"

And so, he began explaining, using his own notes as reference.

His explanation was clear and easy to follow, breaking down complex concepts and demonstrating them with examples from his extensive notes.

But despite having such a capable tutor, Luna found herself unable to concentrate.

'Ugh…… '

Leaning towards him as he spoke, she could smell Rudy.

A fresh, warm scent, like he'd just stepped out of the shower.

As Luna found herself blanking out, Rudy asked,

"Do you understand?"

"Huh?"

Rudy saw Luna with her eyes half-closed and her mind seemingly elsewhere.

"……What are you doing?"

Startled, Luna snapped out of her daze and lifted her head.

"Oh……. ahhh……."

Her face blanched as she started panicking.

'What does he think of me?'

A pervert, shameless…….

Quickly, Luna thought of an excuse and began to speak.

"Rudy, that's-"

However, just as she was about to voice her excuse, Rudy spoke.

"Feeling tired? Do you want to take a break?"

From his perspective, it seemed like Luna had been dozing off, eyes shut and head

drooping.

Luna paused, taken aback by Rudy's words.

"Huh? Oh, yes!"

Then, she quickly regained composure and responded.

"I-I'm fine! Let's continue!"

Rudy gave her a concerned look, but upon seeing her bright smile, he continued the lesson.

-

As their study session continued, day gradually turned into night.

"Ugh……!"

At the end of Rudy's lecture, Luna stretched towards the ceiling, letting out a massive yawn.

Rudy chuckled lightly at the sight of it.

"You did well, Luna."

Luna shook her head at Rudy's praise, startled.

"No, no! Rudy, you're the one who worked hard, not me."

Luna, saying that, opened her mouth carefully with an apologetic look.

"More importantly……. Did I disrupt your studying, Rudy? Finals are coming up soon."

Rudy dismissed her worries with a shake of his head.

"It was actually helpful explaining things to you. It helped me organize my thoughts. I find that I understand things better when I explain them to someone else."

Seeing Rudy's smirk, Luna let out a soft chuckle.

She then found herself filled with a playful spirit.

"Then, thanks to me, you'll score well! You should be grateful to me!"

Luna strutted around, hands on her hips, while Rudy laughed in response.

"Thank you very much~."

The two of them, caught in a lighthearted moment, burst into laughter together.

After their laughter faded, Rudy spoke up.

"Then, I guess it's time for me to go."

"Oh, you're leaving?"

"I need to go eat dinner."

Rudy explained as he began to collect his things.

Luna watched Rudy packing, her mind racing.

-You must! You have to ask Rudy first! Before someone else beats him to it.

Ena's words echoed in her mind.

So, how should she say it?

'Do you have someone in mind to dance with at the ball?'

She shook her head. This was too direct a question.

'Do you want to be my partner at the ball?'

Ball partner.

In this context, partner refers to the man who escorts the woman.

But this also seemed too forward to just blurt out.

'First, I have to bring up a topic…!'

As Rudy methodically packed up his things, Luna tentatively spoke.

"Rudy, do you know what's happening after the exams?"

At her words, Rudy, who was in the process of packing his things, paused with a confused expression.

'Why, why would I ask such a question!!!!!'

Luna inwardly chastised herself, seeing Rudy's confused expression.

But it was too late for regrets. She had to quickly switch to the next topic.

"Ah, you know there's a ball coming up soon, right? The ball… It'll be really fun, won't it?"

'Aghhhhhhh!!!!'

Though she maintained a calm façade, Luna was internally panicking.

She felt like hiding somewhere, embarrassed by her awkwardness.

Rudy wore a puzzled expression before it shifted into a frown.

Seeing his reaction, Luna's heart sank.

'Ah, ah, ahhhhhh!!!'

Rudy, his brows furrowed, pointed at Luna.

However, the words that tumbled out of Rudy's mouth were unexpected.

"Luna. Final exams are coming up soon. You should think about your exams before you think about having fun."

"Ah……”

At Rudy's words, Luna bowed her head.

"A student's duty is to study. You should focus on your studies."

Rudy's words hung heavy in the air as Luna silently nodded.

And so, Rudy's lecture continued.

"I'm… sorry."

Only when Luna murmured an apology did the reprimanding speech come to an end.

After his lecture, Rudy exited the infirmary.

"Come to think of it… there's a ball coming up……"

Rudy pondered aloud about the upcoming event.

"I don't think anything special will happen… maybe I won't attend……"

He casually muttered words that would have made Luna despair had she heard them.

Then he shook his head.

"Well, I'll think about it later."

With that, he headed towards the cafeteria.

-

"Yeniel has arrived."

As a man announced the visitor, a black-haired man seated inside nodded and spoke.

"So, Yeniel is here."

The man in the chair greeted Yeniel arrogantly.

"I am honored to meet the leader."

Yeniel bent one knee in reverence to the black-haired man in the chair.

She slightly lifted her gaze to meet the man's face.

Black hair, red eyes.

Despite a casual gaze, the man seemed to emit an almost radiant glow.

The leader spoke, his eyes trained on Yeniel.

"We need to find a person."

"Just give me the order, and I will immediately find them."

Yeniel bowed her head in response.

"I don't know who they are. Just bring me the one who is watching us."

“……Understood."

Yeniel responded quietly.

The one keeping tabs on The Rebels.

Yeniel had a fair idea who this observer was.

Before she had arrived at The Rebels' location, Yeniel had run into someone.

The Principal of the Academy, McDowell.

-I have been watching The Rebels recently. They seem to have some idea of this as well. I don't know why they've reached out to you, but if anything happens, use this bead. If you use the bead, I will come immediately.

Yeniel recalled McDowell's words.

However, it didn't seem like it was something she needed to be overly concerned about.

The leader didn't appear to have any specific plans for her, and anyway, she wasn't

sure if McDowell was an enemy himself.

McDowell was also currently at the Academy, so Yeniel thought that she should just lay low and prepare for the final exam.

CHAPTER 82
WINTER BALL (4)

Inside Rie's room,

"This isn't it…”

"Ah, understood! Go fetch something else!"

At the head dressmaker's words, the servants hurriedly ran off.

Rie was trying on dresses to wear to the ball.

Her room was crowded with people and was piled with bags full of dresses.

She kept trying on and removing them.

The visitors were high-end dressmakers from the capital.

Originally based in the capital, they had been providing services to Rie since her childhood, even traveling to the academy to tailor her dresses.

But Rie's behavior was different today.

Typically, Rie would select dresses and accessories quickly.

She'd swiftly choose a dress fitting the mood of the ball and select the matching accessories.

Her choices were always spot-on.

But… today was different.

She kept trying on and taking off dresses, and it became clear that at this rate, there wouldn't much left to try on.

Rie frowned at the sight of the dresses the servants brought.

"Why don't any of these suit me…"

The shop owner standing before her turned pale at her words.

Rie was important to his clothing store.

The marketing effect of Rie wearing a dress from his collection to events was massive.

So, if Rie stopped being a customer, the losses would be unimaginable.

"Quick, bring me the most beautiful dress in the world!"

The shop owner yelled at the assistants.

The assistants, wanted to ask 'What does the world's most beautiful dress look like?' but couldn't.

So, they had no choice but to bring dress after dress from their collection.

Seeing Rie's expression, the shop owner carefully spoke up.

"Um… Princess Rie? Aren't you tired? How about a break with a cup of tea?"

"Hmm… Okay."

Upon hearing the shop owner's suggestion, Rie settled down on the sofa.

The shop owner subtly directed the employees and stood beside Rie.

"Ah, today's dresses seem to be lacking. I've told the staff, and they'll bring a better one."

Rubbing his hands, the shop owner gave an uneasy laugh.

"Hmm… I think they're as usual…"

Rie commented casually as she sipped her tea.

What Rie casually mentioned was a shock for the shop owner.

'Wait, has she been finding our dresses disappointing all along…????'

The shop owner had been serving Rie for about 7-8 years.

Rie had been a customer since she was a child.

With her support, the scale of his shop had grown much larger than when it started.

'Of course, Princess Rie's taste would evolve as she matures… '

'Is this as far as we go… '

"Hmm…"

Just as the shop owner was about to wallow in despair, Rie cleared her throat softly.

"There's something I wanted to ask…"

Hearing Rie's words, the shop owner's eyes widened.

This was a chance.

A chance that could be his last.

"Ask anything! I can answer anything for Princess Rie!!!!"

Rie shrank back a bit at the shop owner's sudden enthusiasm, but then relaxed her expression.

"Well, um… what kind of dress do guys usually like?"

"You mean, men…?!"

The shop owner began to think rapidly.

Then, he clapped his hands.

"Fetch dress number 21 and 23 from bag 5, and dress number 6 from bag 12."

As soon as the shop owner commanded, the employees rushed to bring the dresses.

"These are the trendiest dresses. They're fashionable and I believe they would suit Princess Rie perfectly."

Rie stared blankly, alternating her gaze between the dresses and the shop owner.

"Isn't this… a bit short?"

Rie pointed to the skirt of one of the dresses.

"That's the beauty of it!"

"Huh?"

"Men are extremely sensitive to visual stimuli! So, if you wear such a flowy dress!"

“…If I wear it?"

"Then no man will be able to look away!"

Rie rolled her eyes.

"Is that so…?"

At first, she thought the dresses were bold, but the more she looked, the more attractive they became.

"Then… I'll choose this one…”

Rie pointed at one of the dresses as she spoke.

-

It was winter.

Winters at Liberion Academy were freezing.

The biting wind turned my cheeks icy, and each time I exhaled, a puff of white breath rose into the air.

"Whew…”

I warmed my chilled hands with my breath.

"The first year's final exams are already over…”

After finishing all my exams, I was taking a short walk.

I was lost in thought.

With everything that's happened, the year had flown by quickly.

My abilities had considerably developed, and I had learned much from my new experiences.

While I was focused on such thoughts, someone tapped my shoulder.

"Did you do well on the exam?"

Behind me, Astina stood with a smile.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I saw you walking around and decided to come down."

Astina pointed to a window above.

That window appeared to be from the student council room.

"So, how was the exam?"

I responded to Astina's question with a faint smile.

"I think I did pretty okay on the test."

I wasn't certain about my score, but I had given my best.

Due to Robert's hospitalization, I had neglected dark magic, but I still studied more than usual.

There shouldn't be a problem since nothing should happen for a while.

Now it was vacation time.

However, there was still one more event left.

A ball before the holiday.

I felt a flicker of interest when Luna mentioned it last time.

But I had mixed feelings about whether to attend or not.

After all, it would be a gathering of people sporting artificial smiles and hidden intentions.

Seeing me lost in my thoughts, Astina, with a shrug of surrender, posed another question.

"Do you plan on going home during the break?"

"Um… probably not."

Although I said 'probably', it was practically decided.

The current me and the previous 'Rudy Astria' were entirely different individuals.

Certainly, there must have been specific habits or behaviors that he possessed.

However, I knew nothing about them.

If I went home, people around me would undoubtedly notice something wrong.

To avoid arousing suspicion, it was better not to return home.

"So… you're saying you'll attend the ball?"

“…Huh?"

I tilted my head in confusion.

I don't understand how she came to that conclusion.

Astina frowned at my reaction, clearly displeased.

"What else would you do if you stay at the academy? You should go to the ball."

“…Hmm."

"It's good to show your face in such social circles sometimes. And well…”

Astina's voice trailed off, and she slightly turned her head away.

"I have something to say… so, you should go…”

“…Something to say?"

I looked at her, puzzled.

"Why not just say it now?"

Astina scowled at me.

"I have some things to talk about, so just go…”

“…Okay."

-

In the academy's principal's office.

McDowell was reading a letter from Yeniel.

"Those Rebel scoundrels……”

In the end, Yeniel couldn't return to the academy before the final exams.

Although the letter said there were no issues, it was still somewhat worrisome.

McDowell always cherished those under his wing.

Even though Yeniel was recruited through a somewhat unconventional route, the fact she was a student of McDowell's didn't change.

He wished he could help Yeniel return to safety as soon as possible.

However, if someone of his status intervened, the Rebels would likely go completely dark.

It was hard to give up the recently discovered location of their leader.

At least, since he had provided Yeniel with a magical tool capable of sending a distress signal, McDowell believed that Yeniel wouldn't be in too much danger.

"Hmm……”

McDowell set the letter aside and glanced at the documents beside him.

These documents were about those who had been in close contact with Yeniel.

He had them prepared in case anyone grew suspicious due to Yeniel's sudden disappearance.

The faces that appeared in the documents were all familiar.

Rudy Astria and Astina Persia.

They both were aware of Yeniel's circumstances, so there wasn't an issue there.

However, there was one person that could pose a problem.

One person who had been particularly close to Yeniel.

That person was Evan.

"That's not good……”

Having gone through the documents related to Evan, McDowell found that Evan also knew Yeniel was a member of the Rebels.

However, he was unaware of the details.

This was not the main issue.

The most significant problem was Evan's current state.

"Spends all day without speaking to anyone, completely focused on studying……"

McDowell quietly muttered the details outlined in the documents.

Evan's state.

It was not normal.

It wouldn't be surprising if it led to a mental breakdown.

He had to keep his position as the top student while dealing with those lurking below, greedily aiming for his spot.

All this pressure and there was no one by his side.

In the beginning, at least Yeniel had been there, but now he was all alone.

It was a challenging situation.

"I need to check on him."

Having finished reading the documents, McDowell stowed them away in a drawer.

CHAPTER 83
WINTER BALL (5)

The Academy's Winter Ball was an annual event held at the end of the year, meant to celebrate academic achievements and wash away the fatigue.

A party that professors and students alike enjoyed.

Of course, it was hard to say that this ball was a simple and fun event.

Inside, there were those who hid a blade behind false smiles.

While there were people purely enjoying the ball, no one could deny that it was a hotbed of Academy politics.

This ball marked both the end of one year and the beginning of a new one.

It set the stage for academy politics for the coming year.

The outcome of the ball greatly influenced the coming year's events, hinting at who might become the next student council president or who might garner attention.

Personally, I despised this sort of atmosphere.

If I had been ordinary, I would have ignored the political plays happening at the ball.

But now, even if I wanted to, I couldn't ignore it.

I am the child of a Duke's family.

There would undoubtedly be people who wanted to get close to me.

So I made a plan.

“Ugh, it's cold……”

I was standing before the ballroom in a black suit and overcoat.

To my surprise, I had more clothes packed than I initially realized.

Among them were a variety of suits, ranging from ostentatious to comfortable.

A black suit seemed appropriate for a ball.

As soon as the maids in the dormitory heard about the ball, they rushed to help me.

They were a group I seldom interacted with, but for the ball, they eagerly offered their help.

They provided a variety of grooming services, including facial massages, hair styling, and makeup.

It felt peculiar to receive such attention for the first time, but I couldn't deny that I looked better than usual.

Despite that, it felt strange.

I kept adjusting the stiff suit, and fiddled with my neatly combed hair.

At that moment, a familiar voice called out.

"Rudy!"

It was Luna.

Turning, I saw her in a long coat. I couldn't see what she wore beneath it, but her usually messy hair looked remarkably neat.

Behind her, Riku and Ena were approaching.

"Hehe……”

"Gruhh……”

Riku was innocently smiling as if she knew nothing, while Ena next to her was frowning as if something was not to her liking.

"Rudy, have you been waiting long? It must be very cold."

"Huh? No. I haven't waited long."

I responded, my gaze fixed on Luna's face.

Luna's appearance was so commonplace to me that it hardly registered.

But tonight, dressed for the ball, she seemed different.

More beautiful.

"You look pretty, Luna."

I found myself saying with a warm smile.

Luna's eyes widened in surprise, her arms flailing at the unexpected compliment.

"Uh, th, thank you! Rudy…!"

Luna said that and raised her thumb at me.

"Ru, Rudy also looks cool!"

“Haah……”

Ena sighed dramatically behind Luna at her flustered response.

I mirrored Luna's thumbs-up gesture with a light smile.

"Thank you."

"Hehe…” Luna laughed, scratching her head sheepishly.

Ena suggested we head inside, but I held them back.

I couldn't enter the ballroom just yet.

My plan.

I intended to keep anyone from coming near me.

With only a small group like us, there was a concern that others might approach me.

So, I needed the right people.

While I was thinking about that, some familiar faces were coming our way.

"Have you been well?"

"Ah, yes, it's been a while. Rudy."

It was Borval and Locke.

I planned to use these two as my shields.

Locke, despite being unremarkable in our company, was still a member of the respected Lucarion family.

And Borval, a talented individual who had distinguished himself in both the individual skill assessment and joint practical, was also aspiring to be a teaching assistant.

His influence in the academy was something that couldn't be ignored.

Originally, I should have also met with Rie and Astina, but Rie, due to her position as the first princess, said she would arrive a bit later, and Astina was in the middle of preparing her end-of-year speech.

If people of such status were gathered together, I figured unknown individuals wouldn't dare approach us.

"Now, shall we go in?"

I looked at everyone and spoke.

-

Things were beginning to get a little odd.

"Rudy! Look at this! This cookie is so pretty!"

Luna, radiant in her white dress, waved a cookie in her hand, her innocent eyes sparkling.

Her childlike excitement drew a fond smile from me, but therein lay the issue.

"Excuse me……."

A man began, approaching Luna.

"……Yes?"

She answered, a puzzled look on her face.

Seeing this, I intervened,

"Do you have something to say to Luna?"

"N-No, not at all! I'm sorry!"

The man quickly retreated upon my intrusion.

"Hehehe…… Thank you, Rudy!"

"No problem……."

Luna laughed and thanked me, a scenario that was becoming all too familiar.

Luna, with her innocent charm, was attracting quite a lot of attention at the banquet.

Each time Luna's innocent laughter rang through the room, more men seemed to become entranced by her.

Those with political motives didn't bother us, but Luna seemed to be a magnet for a particular type of unwanted attention.

Even with the presence of Locke, and Borval, men kept flocking to Luna.

I realized then that I had overlooked something crucial.

Luna was a woman of undeniable allure, and men are often courageous in the presence of someone they find attractive*.

Tonight, Luna shone brighter than any star, and that was the problem.

The banquet hall was a battleground of political maneuvering and hidden agendas.

Every smile was contrived, every gesture calculated.

Everyone concealed their true motives, speaking in coded and metaphorical language.

Unlike these people, Luna was genuinely enjoying herself, her smile pure and joyful.

She felt like a fresh flower among artificial ones.

Since things had already gone this far, I couldn't just stand by and watch.

Luna had just come here to have fun, so I wanted to make sure she could enjoy herself without feeling uncomfortable.

If I kept a protective presence near Luna, it would discourage these men from approaching her.

So, I ended up following Luna around like a bodyguard.

Time flew by, and the real ball was about to begin.

“Huh.”

With someone's voice, everyone's eyes were drawn to the entrance.

It was as if the person was the protagonist of this ball, making a last-minute entrance just before it began.

It was Rie.

“Hmm?”

I tilted my head as I looked at Rie's outfit.

A dazzling dress mixed with red and black.

And it was short in length.

Rie seemed conscious of her dress being short as well; she kept touching her skirt, trying to pull it down slightly.

Her golden hair combined with the red dress attracted everyone's attention.

But it was different from Rie's usual style.

A short skirt and vibrant colors.

Rie, who usually dressed in a simple style that suited her, had come today in an outfit that was both striking and glamorous.

I was suddenly taken aback by her appearance, losing my appetite.

It wasn't that her style was strange.

It was quite beautiful, capturing the attention of those around her.

I was just puzzled by the changed from her usual attire.

With that, Rie slowly walked into the banquet hall, and numerous people approached her as she entered.

"You look absolutely beautiful, Princess."

"Oh… isn't this dress a trend in the capital?"

They showered Rie with compliments.

"Yes, I had it specially brought from the capital," Rie replied, her smile slightly awkward but her tone as graceful as ever as she began conversing with them.

It seemed difficult to approach her at the moment.

Rie had told me she would mingle for a bit and then come over to where I was.

Well, she would come over on her own, I supposed.

I wanted to ask Rie about her outfit, but seeing her surrounded by so many people, I turned away and looked at Luna.

Luna was staring at Rie, mouth agape.

"Luna?"

"Eek!"

Luna made a strange noise in response when I called her name.

"What's going on?" I asked, looking at her intently.

"N-nothing at all!" Luna waved her hands dismissively.

As she did so, she suddenly stopped and looked at me.

Her eyes fixed on my face, she quietly opened her mouth.

"Rudy… there's something I want to ask you……”

"Hm?"

I stared back at her.

"What is it? You can ask me anything."

"Is Rie… pretty…?"

Luna tilted her head slightly, pointing at Rie.

I nodded at Luna's question.

"Yeah… pretty, right? Even though she's usually so casual, when you look at her from afar, she really does seem like a princess."

Rie is beautiful.

This is something no one can dispute.

The attention she was receiving was enough proof of that.

Even now, everyone looked up at her, trying to get closer to her, hoping to exchange more words.

They were all mesmerized, like insects drawn to a captivating flower.

"Rudy, you said I was pretty too, right?"

"Huh?"

"So……”

She took a step closer, her eyes meeting mine as she asked,

"So, am I pretty, or is Rie pretty?"

Luna spoke, her hands gathered at her chest.

CHAPTER 84
WINTER BALL (6)

"Uh…"

I was at a crossroads.

Luna was looking at me with her round eyes.

Luna and Rie.

These two were completely different.

Objectively, it was difficult to compare the two, and even subjectively, it was hard to decide who was prettier.

Luna, who gives off a pure and warm vibe.

Rie, with her captivating aura and an allure that draws people in.

Their personalities, appearances, and pursuits were all different.

As such, it wasn't possible to rank them like grading at the academy.

So, what choice should I make?

However, people often overlook one thing with difficult problems like this.

The answer was already predetermined.

I immediately made my decision and opened my mouth.

"I think Luna is prettier."

Rie was far away and couldn't hear this.

So, the right choice was Luna, who had asked the question and was right in front of me.

"Huh…"

Upon hearing my words, Luna suddenly turned her head.

Without showing her face to me, she quietly opened her mouth.

"Th-th-thank you!"

Seeing Luna in such a state somehow made me feel shy.

"Hmm… O-okay."

I also turned my head, cleared my throat, and responded.

Just when an awkward silence seemed to be settling in, something happened.

The magical lamps illuminating our surroundings began to turn off one by one.

And only the lamp at the very top stayed lit.

The light from it was cast on one side where Astina stood.

Astina was wearing a dress that was a mix of a moderate blue and white, giving off an elegant vibe.

"Are you all enjoying yourselves?"

Astina asked with a smile.

And then she continued.

"You've all shown incredible dedication this past year. It's been eventful, both for me and the academy."

Astina spoke with emotion, as if reminiscing about the past year.

"Despite my shortcomings as the student council president, I'm eternally grateful to

all the professors and council members for their help during my one-year term."

Astina went on sharing her thoughts about the past year.

Seeing her like this stirred many emotions in me as well.

While I was watching Astina, she turned her head and our eyes met.

Astina paused, looked at me, and gave a sweet smile.

"Thank you… really."

And she spoke her final words of thanks, looking in my direction.

Because the lights where I was were off and it was dark, I wasn't sure if she recognized me, but I felt as if she was looking at me.

Astina turned her head and spoke to everyone.

"Now, please enjoy the last party of the year."

As Astina said this, the lights in the banquet hall turned back on.

"This is kind of touching."

As I said that, Luna, who seemed to agree, nodded her head.

"Rudy."

Just then, someone called my name.

"Ah, Rie. Finished with what you were doing?"

I could see Rie walking towards me.

However, something was off.

Her brow was furrowed, eyes glaring in my direction.

"……?"

I looked at Rie with a bewildered expression.

“Uh……”

Rie approached me with what appeared to be an irritated expression.

Once she got close, she suddenly began to thump my stomach.

“Hey, why! What's going on!”

Her punches didn't hurt that much, but the sudden attack was startling nonetheless.

“Just take it!”

Rie shouted at me with a glower.

I blocked her punches with my arm in surprise.

“You dare, block?”

As soon as I blocked her with my arm, Rie started to hit me wildly.

“……????”

All I could do was to wear a bewildered look and take the hits from Rie.

“What are you two up to now?”

Astina approached us with a sigh upon seeing me and Rie.

Rie, with a smug look, spoke to Astina.

"There's a reason."

Her words only added to my confusion.

"What…?"

What did I do wrong……?

“Anyway, I will be taking Rudy Astria with me for a bit.”

Astina suddenly reached out, her hand grabbing my arm.

“Oh, no way!”

“No way!”

Luna and Rie shouted at Astina in response.

“Sigh…… It's only for a moment. I need to discuss something. It’s about work.”

Astina’s words seemed to dampen Luna and Rie's spirit a bit.

With my arm still in Astina's grasp, I asked her.

“Is it about what you mentioned before?”

Astina nodded subtly and let go of my arm.

“Follow me.”

I silently obeyed and followed her.

-

After a short walk, a terrace located in a corner of the banquet hall came into view.

A curtain hid it from view, making it look like a private conversation area.

As Astina approached, the servant who was blocking the entrance opened the curtain, allowing us to enter.

“Come in.”

“Did you arrange for this space separately?”

Astina answered my question with a nod.

"What's this all about?"

As I questioned Astina, she hardened her expression for a moment and sat down on a chair on the terrace.

“Where should I start……”

Astina murmured to herself and slowly began to speak.

“I'll be returning home tomorrow.”

Astina continued.

“You are aware that I won't be at the academy next semester, right?”

“Ah……”

The first semester of the third year.

This period was an internship period.

A time to experience what one would do after graduating from the academy.

Of course, if one didn't have a decided career path, they could continue studying at the academy, but Astina had a clear career path ahead.

The successor of the Persia Viscount family.

“I will be returning home next semester and will be taking succession classes.”

Although I vaguely knew, it felt odd hearing it directly from Astina.

Astina would be gone for more than half a year starting tomorrow.

The thought of someone I saw every day suddenly disappearing left me with an impending sense of emptiness.

"Sit down for a moment,"

Astina pointed at the chair next to me.

I took a seat and turned to face her.

She responded with a faint smile.

"Honestly, I believe that you, Rie, Luna, and the others all have promising futures. Not because of your status, but due to your prowess in magic and other tasks."

Upon hearing this, I scratched my head,

"Thank you…"

Astina shook her head at my gratitude, continuing her thoughts.

"But, you all are too often caught up in strange incidents. Beyond Luna's abduction, there have been countless other incidents, right?"

"Ahh… Yes,"

I replied with an awkward smile.

"No matter how exceptional your abilities, there are many in this world stronger than you, and you all are still so young. It's quite possible for things to happen that you can't handle."

Astina sighed heavily,

"I feel like I'm leaving a child at the market, especially knowing I'll be away for a while."

I grinned at Astina's concerned expression.

"There were a lot of things, but didn't we overcome them all?"

"Well, that's true,"

she agreed.

I patted my chest reassuringly.

"There's no need for concern. Whatever happens, we'll survive and grow. When you return, you'll find us even better than before."

At this, a smile crept onto Astina's previously worried face.

"I see, hearing you say that makes me feel somewhat relieved."

We exchanged smiles, making eye contact.

"But more than that, I have something else to tell you."

“…Yes?"

Astina glanced toward the terrace entrance briefly, ensuring that no one was nearby before continuing.

"Do you recall Homecoming Day, when I received the Saint's prophecy?"

At Astina's words, my eyes widened.

The Saint's prophecy.

It was meant to be a prophecy about Serina…

But Astina hadn't said anything about it then.

"At that time, there was another prophecy that came down."

"Ahh…,"

I had completely forgotten about it.

Was it something related to Serina?

However, what she said next was something I hadn't anticipated.

"The prophecy I kept hidden was to be wary of you."

“…What?"

I cocked my head, puzzled.

Be wary of me?

The prophecy that should have descended was to be cautious of Serina.

But… the prophecy changed?

"Originally, I had planned to protect you if something happened, but now that I won't be at the academy, I can't do that."

I was too taken aback to respond.

I never imagined the prophecy could change.

"Rudy Astria, I don't know how this prophecy will come into play, but take care of yourself. Be prepared in case something happens to you.

Ask Rie, or ask Luna, and prepare a plan in advance."

Her intense gaze bore into mine as she firmly stated,

"Never, never allow yourself to die."

Astina spoke with utter sincerity.

If I were ignorant of the circumstances, I might have joked, asking 'How can anyone die in the academy?'

However, knowing the future as I did, I could not afford to be so relaxed.

All I could do was respond with equal sincerity.

"I won't die."

Just as I made this pledge, music began to echo from outside.

At that, Astina carefully rose from her seat.

I watched her intently.

"Then, shall we dance a song?"

Astina extended her hand towards me, like a gentleman inviting a lady to dance.

I chuckled softly at the sight.

"I'm no good at dancing."

"Just give it a try."

Astina glared at me as she spoke.

There was no real anger in her gaze.

She was more playful than anything else.

"Very well."

Rising from my seat, I accepted Astina's outstretched hand.

She placed her other hand on my shoulder, and I moved mine to her waist.

The dance was a little clumsy, but I found that by mirroring Astina's movements, I could manage something that resembled dancing.

Astina looked up at me, a smile lighting her face as she saw my awkward expression.

"When I get the chance, I'll come and see you."

Her smile was warm.

CHAPTER 85
WINTER VACATION (1)

The day after the ball ended.

I woke up early in the morning to meet Astina.

It wasn’t specifically for Astina that I woke up early.

It was merely a combination of my morning exercise routine and the opportunity to see her.

"I'll come by whenever I have the time."

“You’ll return in half a year anyway. There will be a lot to learn, so you don't have to force yourself to come."

At my words, Astina gave a faint smile.

"I'm coming because I want to. I'm not forcing myself, don't worry."

With those words, she stepped into the carriage.

"Ah."

Suddenly, as if remembering something, she opened the carriage window to glance at me.

"You seem to have put in some effort this time."

Confused by Astina's comment, I tilted my head.

“What are you talking about?”

Astina gestured towards the main academy building.

"The final exam results are out, aren't they?"

“…….Ah."

With that, Astina departed, leaving me to rush towards the academy's main building.

“What’s this?”

[

1. Evan, Rudy Astria

2. Rie Von Ristonia

3. Luna Railer

…

]

I stared blankly at the rankings.

Evan and I.

We were tied for first place.

"How on earth…”

I was at a loss for words.

Up until now, I had taken care of every incident.

Sure, that gave me plenty of practical experience, but it also meant sacrificing time for theoretical learning and other academic studies.

Not to say that I slacked off on my studies.

I had also been diligently studying and had given up on other extracurricular activities to focus on academics.

"This shouldn't be happening, should it?"

Evan had more time on his hands than I did.

Why then did we receive the same score?

I just couldn't understand.

If I had scored perfectly, it might have made some sense.

But that wasn't the case.

There were definitely questions I didn't know, and I had submitted partial answers for some.

Yet, receiving the same grades as Evan in these finals implied neither of us scored perfectly.

"This is just…"

I ruffled my hair in frustration.

"This is annoying."

All the sacrifices I've made so far.

All the things I've given up.

It felt as if they were all going to waste because Evan hadn't put in the effort.

Of course, these rankings were based on final exam scores, so Evan could still be the top student overall.

However, I can't be sure of that either.

Since Rie had taken first place in the joint practical, she could potentially outscore him.

It was unpredictable.

I had always assumed Evan would consistently produce top results.

But that wasn't the case.

“Sigh…”

The reason I had pushed Evan to grow until now was because of the skill he had shown in the final scene.

A skill only Evan could use.

The magic Evan would acquire once he completed his growth in the academy.

But now, doubts began to plague me.

Should I truly trust Evan in this manner?

Can Evan truly master 'that skill'?

Evan's skills are growing at a rate faster than I expect.

But, was this necessarily a good sign?

Would Evan be able to maintain this pace of improvement?

"Hmm……”

My mind was in turmoil.

The shifting futures, and Evan's unpredictable behavior.

Thinking about the impact of these on the world felt overwhelming.

Yet, one thing was certain.

I couldn't simply trust Evan.

I couldn't leave everything to him.

I had to find a new path.

Both to prevent the unforeseen events along the way, and to ensure that everyone in the academy survives in the end…

-

At the heart of the Empire, within the Astria family mansion.

Tap, tap, tap, tap……

Ian sat behind his office desk, rhythmically drumming his fingers on the table.

Before him lay a document.

A report detailing the incidents at the academy involving Vice Principal Oliver and the Fred family.

Among the names in the report, one stood out.

Rudy Astria.

The biggest factor in the incident.

Indeed, Rudy Astria was that very person.

While it was Robert who ultimately resolved the issue, it was Rudy Astria's initial intervention that provided him the opportunity, making Rudy the hero of the whole event.

This fact offered Ian both discomfort and advantage.

The Astria family was spared scrutiny primarily because of Rudy's actions.

Wouldn't it seem strange that a family member had caused the incident and another from the same family had stopped it?

Of course, those familiar with Rudy's position in the Astria family believed such a scenario was plausible.

With no incriminating evidence against the Astria family and Rudy's actions working as their defense, there were no grounds to investigate them.

"Hmm……”

Yet, despite this advantage, Ian was not pleased.

Actually, had Rudy not intervened, their family wouldn't have attracted any suspicion at all.

Everything would have proceeded smoothly, bringing greater benefits.

They would have acquired Levian's spellbook and Luna Railer, making significant strides in their research.

But now, that had been ruined.

All their plans have been disrupted, including the loss of Vice Principal Oliver and the downfall of the Fred family as collateral damage.

And the one who caused this upheaval was Rudy.

No matter how one spun it, the main disruptor of all their plans wouldn't be viewed favorably, even if he brought some benefits.

It was irritating.

"What on earth is this guy trying to do?"

Ian's initial intention was to merely use Rudy and then discard him.

But if Rudy was going to jeopardize his plans, there was no reason to stand idly by.

The head of the family had already lost interest in Rudy.

And Ian never truly felt that he needed Rudy.

Regardless of Rudy's talents, if he wasn't an asset to the family, then he was a liability.

Given his recent actions, he seemed more like a threat to Ian’s position as the family head rather than an asset.

Rudy Astria.

Had all his past behaviors in the family so far been mere pretense?

And was he now revealing his true colors?

If that were the case, Ian was ready for a confrontation.

Ting, ting.

Ian tapped the bell on his desk.

A butler soon entered the office.

"You called for me?"

Looking at the butler, Ian instructed,

"Fetch me some stationery."

The butler cautiously asked,

"Which stationery would you like, sir?"

"Just a regular one will do."

He then added,

“I'm going to send a letter to Liberion Academy.”

Ian decided, it was time to call Rudy back to the family.

-

Luna and Rudy were studying alone in the library.

The disappointment at the ball.

Astina had taken Rudy away, so Luna couldn't dance with him.

But she found solace in the thought of spending the upcoming break with Rudy.

Just the two of them…

As she was lost in her daydreams, a problem arose.

“……You're not going back to the capital?"

Rie unexpectedly appeared, bringing a stack of books to the library.

Rie, who usually didn’t visit the library, was now here to study.

"It's not that I won't go at all, I'll just go slowly,"

Rie replied cheekily, taking a seat next to Rudy.

"Wha…!"

Luna's eyes widened.

It was a significant problem.

When two people sat at a table, it was natural to sit across from each other.

That was common sense.

But with three?

The seating arrangement changed.

One could sit next to someone else.

Luna wanted to sit next to Rudy.

If Ena or Riku had been there, she could've sat next to Rudy, but when it was just the two of them, she couldn't.

Although she could brazenly sit next to Rudy, Luna didn't have the audacity to do so.

Rie's smug smile only intensified Luna's annoyance.

Lost in thought, Luna was pulled back to reality by Rudy's voice.

"So, you're planning to stay in the academy for a while?"

"Um… Yeah, why?"

Rudy then slid a book between Luna and Rie.

"Rie, Luna," he pointed to the book, "Can you help me?"

"Huh?"

"Wha?"

Rie and Luna stared at Rudy in confusion.

Until this moment, Rudy had always seemed to shoulder his challenges alone.

Usually, when he asked for help, it was to assist someone else, not himself.

But today, Rudy was different.

"Can you help me?"

The book Rudy pointed to was about elementals.

Specifically, it described how to subdue them when they go berserk.

It detailed various methods related to the topic.

"I'll explain everything about what's to come,"

Rudy said, his expression serious.

"My elemental, Priscilla, and……."

His finger tapped the book,

"What's going to happen to me, in the future."

CHAPTER 86
WINTER VACATION (2)

The Saint doesn't simply guess at the future.

While the future changes based on our choices, her prophecies don't.

When the Saint says something will happen, it inevitably will.

In essence, her words are the result, a declaration of a fixed outcome.

No matter how much we struggle, that event will happen.

This is why the Saint doesn’t specify the cause leading to her predictions.

Because she knows, in one way or another, the events she has seen will unfold.

Furthermore, she doesn't discuss the aftereffects of her prophecies.

She only knows that it will take place.

That's why she often gives general advice: to be cautious of someone or to watch something closely.

She might not know under what circumstances or in which manner these events will happen.

Nor what changes they may bring about.

But one thing was clear: the prophecy centered on the rampage of Priscilla.

While I wasn't sure what the Saint saw, I was certain that the announcement meant for Homecoming Day was about Priscilla.

Preparing for this became my priority.

"Priscilla will go on a rampage someday."

I shared, looking between Rie and Luna.

"I don't know whether it will be today, tomorrow, or a year from now, but it will inevitably happen."

"Then… what should we do? If an elemental goes on a rampage……"

Luna's voice held a hint of fear.

"How do you know that?"

Rie, eyebrows knitted, asked.

"Astina received a prophecy on Homecoming Day."

At this, Rie nodded.

"For now, I'm preparing for it."

"But if an elemental goes on a rampage……"

Luna looked at me, her face filled with worry.

Rie shared her concern.

They probably both know very well.

"There is a way for the user to survive even if an elemental goes on a rampage,"

I said, aiming to calm them.

Though this concept wasn't widely studied yet, I had a rough idea.

After all, in the game, Serina caused Priscilla to rampage and still survived.

And the method was relatively simple.

"When the elemental rampages, you just need to reverse summon it and calm the

user's mana."

"That's exactly why it's a problem; it's not possible."

Rie argued, her face still scrunched up in a frown.

She wasn't wrong.

"Yes, the problem is that it's considered impossible."

A rampaging elemental.

It's like the mana explosion Luna caused in the library.

A mana explosion simply involves the user's mana surging out uncontrollably, and calming the user down is enough.

However, with an elemental rampage, you must soothe both the user and the elemental.

"That's why I'm reading this this."

I pointed to the book in front of me.

It detailed spells related to mana control and mental purification—magic that could potentially control an elemental rampage.

But they were merely theories.

They weren't results of proven research, but mere conjectures.

Merely suggesting, "Couldn't it work this way?"

It wasn't a well-established thesis.

That's why I couldn't tackle this on my own.

Researching this alone would take too much time.

Proving this theory correct through experimentation wasn't something I could

achieve by myself at my current level.

"Rie, Luna, could you help me?"

Their reactions were immediate.

"That sounds fun."

"If Rudy needs our help, of course we'd help!"

And so, our research began.

-

The next day, I received a letter.

“A letter from… my brother?”

I tilted my head in surprise at the unexpected mail.

The name written on it:

Ian Astria.

I carefully opened the letter and began to read its contents.

Most of it seemed like small talk.

Inquiries about my well-being that I wasn't particularly interested in.

As I skimmed through, the main point emerged towards the end.

“Return to the family…?”

Not our family home, but the bustling capital.

Ian wrote about wanting to catch up and asked me to visit during the holidays.

“I'm definitely not going……”

I thought.

The Astria family's home and the capital residence were not the same in many ways.

The residence in the capital was where Ian Astria stayed.

It was more of a temporary lodging for him while he dealt with various affairs in the capital.

On the other hand, the primary residence of the Astria family, where my father, the Duke, resided, was our ancestral home in the Astria territory.

Visiting the capital meant it would just be Ian and me.

I doubted that would end well.

Ian was probably suspicious of me.

After Homecoming Day, rumors about me began to spread throughout the empire.

I've defeated Harpel, outsmarted Serina, achieved success at the Academy, and recently opposed Vice Principal Oliver and the Fred family.

I doubt these went well with him.

So, visiting a place where only Ian was present could only spell trouble.

There was no upside to it.

After thinking it over, I made up my mind.

“I'll just pretend I didn't receive the letter.”

If I send a reply saying I won't come, Ian would find a way to drag me to the capital.

Instead, by not responding and showing no reaction, I could buy some time.

When the holidays conclude and another letter appears, I can claim the upcoming semester as a reason to stay away.

With the semester beginning, what could Ian possibly do?

Bang! Bang!

A sudden forceful knocking interrupted my thoughts.

“I got it, I'm coming.”

I tossed the letter into the trash and opened the door to see Rie with a multitude of books.

Luna was behind her, equally burdened with various books and stacks of papers.

Rie grumbled, her face scrunched in displeasure,

"Ugh, these are heavy."

"Thanks for bringing them."

I helped Luna and Rie stack the materials in a corner of my room.

Looking around my room, Rie asked,

"Wouldn't it be better to get a separate room for this? Do we have to do it in your room?"

"There's no need. Renting a room outside the academy would only lead to more issues."

We start our research from today onwards.

And the chosen location was none other than my room.

The room was spacious enough for three people, and since it was mine, I felt more at ease.

Initially, I considered reserving one of the academy's laboratories or renting a room outside the academy.

However, I didn’t like the idea that our research might get leaked, and the cost of

renting a room seemed unnecessary.

Even if I had plenty of money, there was no need to spend unnecessarily.

"Shall we begin?"

We began attaching the magic circles we had designed the previous day to the walls.

We discussed two main plans yesterday.

The first aimed to counteract the elemental.

By focusing on Priscilla's vulnerabilities and the nature of elementals, we intended to gain control.

Rie was in charge of this because she was the most knowledgeable about elementals among us.

The second strategy centered on controlling my mental state and mana.

This task was Luna's.

If I were to lose control, Luna's plan was to use a magic circle to stabilize both my mind and mana.

While Luna and Rie each took on these two tasks, I would assist them.

Honestly, I wanted to take on one of these roles myself, but it's not practical.

If a magical circle had an aspect only I knew about and I went berserk, Luna and Rie wouldn't be able to modify or repair it.

So, I settled into a supportive role.

"Rudy, bring that over."

"Ah, got it."

But something felt wrong.

"Rudy! Can you help me with this?"

"Yeah, like this?"

I responded immediately to Luna's request, too.

Gradually, I felt…

"Rudy. Can you give my shoulder a rub?"

"Rudy! Could you brew some warm tea for me?"

There seemed to be sparks flying between Rie and Luna.

Helping with minor tasks was no problem, but it seemed they were intentionally finding or creating tasks for me to do.

"……”

Regardless, it was my duty to assist them, so I followed their directions.

"Rudy."

"Rudy!"

"……”

-

In the heart of the Empire lies the Royal Palace.

The Emperor walked slowly down a corridor, his eyes settling on a part of the Palace.

This section had once been the living quarters of the First Princess, Rie.

But now, it seemed deserted with only servants moving about; Rie was nowhere to be seen.

Seeing this, the Emperor addressed his attendant.

"Has Rie not returned yet?"

"Yes… Princess Rie said she has some research at the Academy and will be returning a bit later."

"Hmm… She should come back."

The Emperor looked up to the sky.

Snowflakes began to drift down from the heavens, settling softly in the palace gardens.

"It seems the snow is beginning to fall…"

The Emperor mused, stroking his beard.

"Tell her to return before the snowfall intensifies."

"Yes. I understand."

As the attendant replied, another voice sounded from behind.

"Don't you think my sister can take care of herself?"

It was a voice similar to Rie's, but unlike her calm and mature tone, this one was bright and spirited.

Turning his gaze, the Emperor smiled,

"Hoho, Yuni, you're here."

Speaking was the Second Princess, Yuni von Ristonia, Rie's younger sister.

"Don't you have me by your side, father?"

With a bright smile, Yuni approached the Emperor.

Hearing her, the Emperor chuckled and gently patted her head.

"If you also decide to attend the Academy, what joy will remain for this old man?"

"Even if I decide to attend the Academy, I'll make sure to visit the palace often~"

Yuni responded playfully.

However, considering the rigorous schedule of the academy, frequent visits to the palace would be quite a challenge.

“Even if it's just words, I appreciate it.”

The Emperor looked at Yuni with a warm smile.

In response, Yuni's laughter filled the corridor.

CHAPTER 87
WINTER VACATION (3)

Crunch. Crunch.

I was on my way to the library to fetch some materials.

The freshly fallen snow on the ground compressed with a delicate crunch under my feet.

Given it was the holiday break, the academy was deserted, with only the impressions of my steps marring the pristine snow.

Lost in thought, I glanced downward.

Bending over, I reached down and scooped up a handful of snow.

"It's cold."

With my hands, I shaped the snow into a perfect ball.

"Hmm…"

Staring at the round snowball, I made up my mind.

Today, let's have some fun.

-

With a bounce in my steps, I approached Rie and Luna.

Pushing aside the tasks I had originally planned to do, I immediately went to them.

However, the response I got was unexpected.

“…I don’t want to, it's cold."

"Hehe… Rudy, are you still a child?"

“…Huh?"

Their response caught me off guard.

"You… don't have snowball fights?"

For the past two weeks, the two of them had been deeply focused, doing nothing but research.

While I occasionally went out for some physical activity, these two barely moved.

They would hastily eat whatever was available in the room and focus entirely on their research, with no other distractions.

That's why I believed they needed a change of pace.

Two weeks had already passed since we started this project.

At this point, it'd be normal for one to feel stuffed and less productive.

Though it looks like they haven't reached that point.

At first, they would give me peculiar tasks, which was a bit frustrating, but that only lasted a day or two.

Once they truly delved into their research, things progressed smoothly and quickly.

However, I was concerned for them.

Being locked up in a room continuously is detrimental to both physical and mental health.

Even a short walk can make a huge difference in keeping one's mind sharp and alert.

These two hadn't even taken that short walk or any other activity.

I couldn't help but worry.

So, I decided to take action.

I thought that by using the snow as an excuse, I could get them outside, even if just for a little while.

"How about making a snowman then?"

"Rudy! We're not kids. Why would we make a snowman?"

Luna remarked, placing her hands on her hips.

"No… I didn't…"

I was genuinely surprised to hear Luna's comment.

Though Luna wasn't particularly childish, her behavior and mindset were closest to that of the youngest among us.

"Don't go outside, it's cold. Let's stay inside and have some warm tea. We won't ask you to do anything anymore."

Rie said dismissively.

I felt a tad upset.

Was I saying all this for my own sake?

I was just concerned since they were always inside.

Of course, I do love snow.

Seeing the academy grounds blanketed with untouched snow evoked a certain wave of nostalgia.

Especially since the snow at the academy was mostly untouched.

To see this and not build a beautiful white snowman felt almost sinful.

"Fine then…"

I sighed and headed towards the door.

While I rarely ever felt a strong desire to play, I couldn't resist the allure of snow.

But then again, these two weren't just lazing around, they were researching for my sake.

So, suggesting something like this might have been inappropriate.

My excitement got the best of me, what with the snow and all.

Considering the situation, it might've been a bit too much…

"Rudy…?"

As I tried to leave the room, Luna called out to me.

"Yes?"

She hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"Want to play outside for just an hour?"

I stared wide-eyed at Luna's proposal.

"But only make a small snowman and then come back inside, okay? We might catch a cold if we stay out for too long."

"Luna…!"

I was deeply touched by her words.

"Ah…"

Upon hearing that, even Rie put down her pen.

"Alright. But just for a little while."

I suddenly felt a surge of pettiness at Rie's words.

So, she wants to join now that Luna's agreed to it?

I looked at her with a kind smile and began,

“Actually, Rie, if you don't want to come out, you can just stay inside.”

“…What?"

Rie's eyes widened in surprise.

"It's cold outside. We'll play for a bit and come back."

As I said that, Rie began to look flustered.

"No, I mean…”

"Just have some warm tea inside. You can rest until we come back. I won't say anything."

"What… what are you saying!"

Rie was so taken aback she couldn't continue her sentence.

I smirked mischievously, observing her reaction.

Then, turning to Luna, I said,

"Let's just make one snowman and come back, Luna."

"Huh? Oh… okay! Sounds fun!"

Luna seemed initially surprised, but then she responded with a bright smile.

"Ugh… Ugh…!!"

All Rie could do was glare at me with clenched fists, unable to say a word.

"Luna, it's cold outside, so bring a scarf and gloves too."

"Yeah! I brought them just in case when I came to your room earlier!"

"No, wait…”

Rie reached out towards me.

"What? What's wrong?"

I teased Rie playfully.

"I… I want…”

Rie hesitated, unable to ask to join us.

Normally, she would've brushed it off as a joke and just joined, but not today.

"What did you say? I couldn’t quite hear you."

I smiled cheekily at Rie.

With pursed lips, Rie glared back.

"What? Have something to say?"

"I… I want to join you guys."

Finally suppressing her frustration, Rie raised her voice at me.

Seeing this, I responded with a bright smile,

"Alright, let's all go together."

-

“Rudy! Is this how it's done?”

“Yeah! That size looks about right.”

We headed straight out to the Liberion Academy's sports field.

Rie and I began rolling up a massive snowball.

“Do we really have to do this?”

Rie spoke to us with a slightly annoyed expression.

“I mean, sure, we're all dressed up for it, but did you have to wear so many layers?”

I looked at Rie with a mocking glance.

She had bundled up in so many layers that she resembled a snowball herself.

If her clothes were white, they would've blended perfectly with the snowballs we made.

“It’s cold. I absolutely despise the cold,”

Rie grumbled, turning her head away.

“But doesn’t rolling the snow with your bare hands hurt? Why don't you just let me do it?”

“No way! I even enjoy the sting of the cold on my hands.”

In truth, when we first arrived, there was already a snowman standing.

Rie had quickly conjured one up by using elemental magic to gather snow.

However, I immediately destroyed it.

“That’s not a real snowman!”

I felt like a master craftsman witnessing factory-made ceramics—completely artificial and void of soul.

“Rudy! I’ll move this over there!”

“No, no, let me roll it over to you.”

I rolled my larger snowball towards Luna’s smaller one.

“And now, like this…”

I began placing Luna's smaller snowball atop the one I made.

And just like that, our snowman was complete.

"Phew!"

"Wow!!"

Both Luna and I gazed upon our snowman, wearing proud smiles.

Thankfully, the snow was of good quality and untouched, allowing us to make it quickly.

"Now, let's…"

I was about to get the bag containing sticks and tools I had prepared for decoration when Rie interrupted.

"Hey, it's been an hour already."

"…What?"

I stared at Rie in surprise.

"That's right. We only agreed to play for an hour, remember?"

Luna nodded in agreement, casting a glance my way. But then…

"Our snowman isn't completely finished yet…"

I looked utterly crestfallen.

Luna then waved her finger at me, adopting a reprimanding tone.

"Rudy! Are you planning to break our promise?"

From the side, Rie smirked mischievously.

"Or would you like me to quickly finish it up for you?"

“Absolutely not!”

I immediately reached out, signaling her to stop, and turned to Luna.

Her stern gaze told me she wasn't going to budge.

Realizing this, I finally gave in.

“Alright… let’s finish it another time.”

However, just because I gave up on completing the snowman didn't mean I had lost my playful spirit.

With a swift move, I scooped up some snow, pressed it into a ball, and threw it right at Rie.

“Huh?”

With a soft thud, Rie made a peculiar sound as the snowball struck her.

Because of her tightly-fitting clothes, Rie couldn't evade the incoming snowball.

“So cold!!!”

Rie’s eyes widened in surprise as the snowball hit near her neck, and she frantically tried to shake it off.

She reached up to her neck to remove the snow that had found its way inside her collar.

Watching her, I couldn't help but let out a chuckle.

“Hehe… This is what you get for coming out here and not expecting a snowball attack.”

I felt satisfied, having finally managed to hit Rie with a snowball.

“Well, now that you’ve gotten what you deserve… I should head in…”

I said, smiling at Rie.

But I stopped midsentence upon seeing Rie's expression.

Beside Rie floated Sylph, the wind elemental.

And next to Sylph, a massive amount of snow hovered in the air.

“Not satisfied yet?”

Rie stared at me with fierce determination.

“…No, I’m satisfied.”

I backpedaled, my voice edged with nervousness.

However, Rie challenged my statement.

“No, you’re not.”

Whoom.

All the snow that Sylph held suddenly rushed towards me.

“Aaargh!!!”

Caught off guard and unable to conjure any magic in response, I was pelted by the flurry of snow.

“Rudy!!!”

Luna's voice rang out in alarm.

-

“…It's cold.”

I shivered as I walked towards the dormitory.

“Who told you to do that in the first place?”

Rie said that, but seeing my discomfort, she took off her coat and draped it over me.

Watching this, Luna remarked,

“Rudy, you kind of look like a puppy.”

I looked straight at Luna,

“…Is that a compliment?”

“Hehehe…”

Luna didn't answer, but gave an awkward laugh.

“Good grief…”

Rie sighed, looking at me with a mix of amusement and exasperation.

As we slowly approached the dormitory, a commotion arose.

“Princess Rie!”

The housekeeper, Azela, who managed the dormitory, was rushing towards us.

“Yes?”

Rie tilted her head, noticing Azela's urgency.

“What happened?”

Catching her breath, Azela exclaimed,

“Huff… Huff… His Majesty, the Emperor, has sent a carriage for you!”

“…What?”

CHAPTER 88
WINTER VACATION (4)

A carriage adorned with the royal emblem of a dragon arrived at the front of Liberion Academy.

"No, I said I'm not going."

Rie voiced out defiantly, a frown etching her face.

"Um… His Majesty insisted on bringing you back……”

The knights, visibly bewildered by Rie's refusal, replied.

Despite their attempts to persuade her, Rie held her position.

This standoff between Rie and the knights continued for about ten minutes, and soon Rie began to shiver visibly.

From earlier, Rie seemed to really despise the cold.

Though she was wrapped snugly, she could only fend off the chill for an hour or so in the open, where the wind bit harder.

"Why don't you go inside since it's cold?"

I suggested, guiding Rie gently.

Rie appeared momentarily surprised by my intervention but soon offered a warm smile.

"Ah…”

With my words, the knights seemed to snap out of their stupor, lowering their heads in apology.

"We're sorry. Let's talk inside."

Together, we made our way towards the dormitory.

I went to my room briefly to change out of my wet clothes and then made my way to Rie's room.

The discussion, or rather the argument, between Rie and the knights was still ongoing.

"No, I said I'm not going now, okay? I'll go on my own later."

"But a snowstorm is coming soon, won't it be hard for you to go then?"

"Then I simply won’t go."

Arms crossed, Rie stood her ground.

"Oh, Rudy's here?"

As I entered the room, Luna, who had been at the back, greeted me.

"Hm?"

Hearing Luna call my name, the knight, seated, glanced up at me.

"By any chance, are you Young Master Rudy Astria?"

"Ah, yes."

At my confirmation, the knight greeted me warmly, rising from his chair.

"Oh, nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about the Oliver incident."

He extended a hand, cordially shaking mine, although it seemed out of place in our current situation.

But I shook back anyway.

"I really look forward to your future. When the Young Master enters politics and

starts active work, I wonder what kind of figure you will show… Haha, the future of the empire is bright."

He chuckled merrily, but even though it was nice to be praised…

As the knight's eyes shifted from me to Rie, understanding dawned on me.

This was a plea for assistance.

He wanted me to persuade Rie to return to the royal palace.

But honestly, I wasn’t inclined to help this knight.

Rie's wishes should be respected, and I didn't feel it was right for me to push her, especially when it wasn't my place to interfere.

Frowning, I addressed the knight,

"Nothing will come out of you saying that to me."

The knight seemed to understand and scratched his head in an apologetic manner.

"Ah… I'm sorry."

With a nod at the knight's regret, my eyes found Rie, now settled on the sofa.

"Anyway, I'm not going back. I have things to do."

“…Things you have to do?"

The knight's interest piqued at her words.

"I'm researching magic right now, so I can't go back until it's done."

Rie's voice carried a tone of unwavering determination.

"Sigh… Your Highness… If it's research, can't you get help from the Royal wizards?"

Yet Rie remained unaffected.

"What's the point of that. And I feel more comfortable researching with my friends than those old men."

"And isn't it very cold here…"

"It's not cold at all?"

Rie rebutted the Royal knight's words point by point.

The knight's words gradually faded away.

Then a knock was heard.

"Um, Young Master Rudy, are you in there?"

"…Me?"

I was confused.

After all, this was unquestionably Rie's room.

"Come in."

Following Rie's invitation, a maid walked in.

She was the same maid who had hurried to Rie's side earlier.

The current situation eerily mirrored that one.

"Um, Young Master Rudy… A carriage has arrived."

"…What?"

I was taken aback by her words.

Rie had been receiving countless letters from the Emperor, but for me to get one…

Then it clicked.

"Could it be brother…"

"Yes. Lord Ian Astria sent a carriage."

I clenched my teeth at the news.

A carriage without even a prior letter?

The letter Ian had sent didn't mention anything about sending a carriage at all.

He had merely said let's meet face to face.

It seems he took action when I didn't respond.

Following the maid, a knight stepped into the room.

He was Thomas, the knight I had met on Homecoming Day.

"Young Master Rudy. I've come to escort you."

"…"

Thomas offered a warm, friendly smile.

He appeared pleasant, but remembering what they did to Astina on Homecoming Day, I couldn't think too highly of him.

"Why are you here?"

I asked with a hint of annoyance.

"Ah, didn't you receive the letter from Lord Ian?"

"No, I got it."

With a carriage already sent, I couldn't use the absence of a letter as an excuse.

"I'm doing some magic research right now so I can't go."

"Magic research?"

Thomas echoed my words.

"It looks like I won't be able to leave until I finish my research."

"Ah, I don't think that will work."

"What?"

I narrowed my eyes at Thomas' rejection.

However, Thomas appeared unfazed and continued.

"Right now, the head of the family is also at the Astria mansion in the capital. It was decided that the family members and related people would have a meal together. That's why Lord Ian is looking for you, Lord Rudy."

Hearing this, I gritted my teeth once again.

While I found Thomas irritating, what he said made me pause.

Such a gathering was not mentioned in the letter.

However, I had already discarded the letter, and even if I hadn't, challenging his claim would be difficult.

"Sir… if you don't return, the Duke might get upset… Will that be alright?"

Thomas's words may have sounded like he was looking out for me, but essentially, it was more like a veiled threat.

I took a moment to think.

Was his statement true?

I doubt it.

Would the Duke and Ian genuinely invite me to a family gathering?

Really?

But, on the off chance that it's true…

After a bit of thought, I made my decision.

"Understood. I'll go."

This was a situation I was bound to face sooner or later.

But first, I needed to make some preparations.

Wouldn't I need my own protective measures?

Upon hearing my agreement, Rie and Luna looked at me, their expressions full of surprise.

"Rudy, are you going?"

"Rudy?"

I didn't respond to Rie and Luna's questions and instead turned to Thomas.

"Just give me a moment. I need to organize the research materials I've been working on."

"Ah, that much is possible."

"Luna, can you help me for a moment? I have some things I need to bring."

Luna tilted her head in confusion.

The truth was, I wasn't really bringing any research.

That was because I was only an assistant.

"Yep! Got it."

For now, Luna held off on further questions and approached my side.

Together, we went to my room.

-

After Rudy announced he would retreat to his room and then vanished.

Rie turned to Thomas,

"If Rudy's going to the capital… Does that mean the Astria mansion there?"

"Ah, yes, that's correct."

Responding to Rie's words, Thomas gave a nod of confirmation.

Upon hearing this, Rie swiftly turned her head towards the Royal Knights.

"I'll be heading back too."

“…Huh?"

"Considering things, getting assistance from the royal wizards seems best for my research. It's also cold here, so I should rest at the palace."

"But… you said researching with friends is best… and that it wasn't that cold…”

"Is there a problem with me leaving?"

"No, no! I'll prepare the carriage immediately."

The Royal Knight appeared a bit taken aback, but he promptly left.

-

Meanwhile, in Rudy's room, Luna entered, looking rather bewildered.

Rudy, without expressing a word, walked over to a drawer in the corner.

He pulled out a piece of paper from the drawer.

"Rudy, what's that?"

Luna asked, but Rudy didn’t reply and instead tore the paper.

Riiiip

"Huh?"

Luna was startled by Rudy's sudden action, but seeing no change in the room, she tilted her head, puzzled.

"Luna, listen closely. I've activated silent magic. So, no sound will be heard from our surroundings."

"Wh… what?"

Luna couldn't conceal her shock at Rudy's unexpected words.

"Anyway, my relationship with my brother isn't great. It probably got worse after the Oliver incident."

Upon hearing Rudy's words, Luna gave a nod.

"And when I return home this time, it's hard to predict what might happen. So, you need to write a letter and send it to the Astria mansion in the capital."

"A… a letter?"

Luna tried to remain calm.

She had many questions, but it didn't seem like the right moment to ask them.

For now, she focused on the urgent facts Rudy was sharing.

"Also, in 5 days, if you don't receive a response or if I don't return, please ask Professor Robert or Professor Cromwell for help."

With that, Rudy gripped Luna's shoulders.

"I'm counting on you."

"Y-yes!"

Then, Rudy quickly collected a few scrolls and books from his drawer.

"I'm sorry I can't help with the research… I'll be back soon."

With a hastily packed bag, Rudy prepared to depart.

"Ru… Rudy."

At that moment, Luna called out to him.

"Please be careful… don't get hurt…”

Hearing Luna's words, Rudy offered a soft smile.

CHAPTER 89
WINTER VACATION (5)

The sound of the wheel catching on rock echoed.

Inside a carriage, I sat alone.

Through the window, I could see Thomas riding beside the carriage on his horse.

"Hmm…”

I stroked my chin, lost in thought.

The reason Ian had called for me.

There seemed to be only one answer when I thought about it.

That I had disrupted Ian's plans.

That I had constantly drawn Ian's attention.

That my potential power was being evaluated very highly.

And…

"…”

On further thought, it wasn't just one reason.

There were a considerable number of them.

I scratched my cheek in thought.

Nevertheless, I felt wronged.

The only time I truly caught Ian's attention was recently.

Prior incidents had other individuals in the limelight, not me.

While I suffered because of those incidents, I wasn't the one who reaped the credit for resolving them.

However, this time was different. All the credit had come to me.

I assumed both Robert and Astina had testified in my favor.

Their words carried weight within the academy, and they had been witnesses to the entire incident.

Because of their testimonies, all the credit came to me.

To be honest, I felt I hadn't done much.

Had Robert not appeared, all my efforts would have been in vain.

So, to be honest, I felt a bit uneasy about it.

A few months ago, I might have been flustered by receiving such credit.

But now, it was different.

Handing everything over to Evan felt like a gamble.

There's a saying about not putting all your eggs in one basket.

If I continued to channel all credit towards Evan and he didn't turn out as I envisioned, it would all be for naught.

In that situation, I would have no choice but to calmly accept my fate.

So, I prepared even for unforeseen circumstances.

I brainstormed ways to survive.

To do that, I needed achievements, power, or even involve myself in the politics around me.

Then, a voice came from outside.

"Young Master Rudy, we are almost at the mansion."

I looked outside upon hearing Thomas's words.

A grand mansion came into view.

Unlike our family home filled with lilies, this mansion exuded elegance and tidiness.

I stepped out of the carriage and stared at the mansion.

"…"

Something felt off.

There wasn't a single person around.

Despite the carriage's arrival, nobody came out to greet us.

I spoke quietly.

"There's no one around."

"Ah, they might be inside, preparing for a meal."

Thomas spoke as if it were nothing.

However, his words didn't sit right with me.

"A meal? Just an ordinary meal?"

"Ah… Well…"

Thomas hesitated as I questioned him.

If it was an ordinary meal, there would be no reason for all the servants to be there.

And if it was a meal with the family, many carriages should have been parked in front of the mansion.

But neither was the case.

I had wondered about it ever since Thomas came to the academy, but I was already sure of what they intended to do.

I was fearful, at first.

But now I was merely curious.

For starters, Ian couldn't kill me.

He sent me here in front of many people.

If he suddenly killed me, even Ian wouldn't be able to get away with it.

So, what was he planning?

I glanced at Thomas and began to walk.

I had taken precautions. It was time to see how these guys would act.

I walked toward the mansion, and Thomas followed.

Upon opening the mansion door, I was met with the sight of a typical mansion interior – stairs and a carpet stretched out below.

I stepped inside.

However, I stopped immediately.

Something felt off.

Clearly, inside the mansion, I should have felt the soft texture of the carpet underfoot, but what I felt was the rough texture of stone.

“…What is this?"

Perplexed by the disparity between what I saw and felt, I looked at Thomas.

Suddenly, I saw Thomas’s hand lunging towards me.

"Ugh!"

Thomas forcefully pushed me.

I was shoved further into the mansion.

No, to be precise, it wasn't inside a mansion at all.

"What is this?"

Pushed down by Thomas, I scanned my surroundings.

Before me were iron bars.

Bars that looked like they belonged in a prison.

The floor was bumpy and cold stone.

"What's going on?"

The once-present Thomas had vanished.

I tried to stand up, hoping to get a clearer view outside the bars.

That's when I heard a familiar male voice.

“Have you arrived, Rudy?”

I looked in the direction of the voice.

There stood Ian Astria, my brother.

“What is the meaning of this?”

I said, my gaze fixed on him.

"I didn't want it to come to this."

Ian replied, shrugging.

“I don’t understand why you're doing this.”

I stated flatly.

Ian's eyebrows furrowed in annoyance.

"I truly despise those who act irritatingly before me."

Ian continued.

“That’s why I really liked it when you were being a fool. Thanks to your antics, I always seemed the better one."

Ian said, seemingly annoyed as he gripped the bars and glared at me.

“But why did you suddenly change your behavior? If you've always acted the fool, why not continue? Did you think someone at the academy would protect you?”

While Ian spoke, I discreetly observed my surroundings.

Honestly, I wasn't particularly interested in such talk.

It wasn't like there was any useful information from it.

First, I decided to focus on the problem in front of me.

How did I end up in a prison?

Illusion magic?

But then, I should have realized as soon as I stepped out of the carriage.

I only realized when I set foot inside.

So, it wasn't as if I was brought here from the start.

I tried to continue the conversation to gather any information while looking around.

"Why are you doing this? Even if I'm an inconvenience, if others find out, they won't just let it slide."

"Well, I don't intend to keep you here forever. I have no intention of hurting you either."

At Ian's words, I frowned.

Ian slid a piece of paper through the bars.

"Sign this document."

I looked at the paper.

It was a withdrawal form from the academy.

"Leave the academy and live quietly in the family's estate. I promise no harm will come to you if you do so."

Withdrawal?

My eyes widened at that.

Then I thought.

Isn't this… not a bad option?

The 'annihilation ending' in the end involves the massacre of students, professors, and others within the academy.

While there might be consequences for those outside the academy, the impact wouldn't be as bad.

I wasn't sure what would follow after that event, but at least I could save my life.

I chuckled at such a thought.

Why was I thinking like this?

Of course, I want to save my own life, but I've already formed deep friendships with the people at the academy.

Could I bear it if they all died? I might go mad in such a situation.

Even if I survived, I would regret that choice.

And there was no guarantee of survival anyway.

Ian of the Astria family was almost like the final boss.

And with Ian's actions, the entire Astria family would be held accountable.

Because of the power Ian possesses, people…

Ah.

I realized what happened.

Ian's power.

No, more precisely, the Astria family's space magic.

The reason the Astria family was recognized and respected in the empire.

It was because of the magic passed down through generations in the Astria family.

And the events that would happen later were largely due to this power.

I asked Ian,

"Did you transport me here using spatial magic?”

Spatial magic.

A ridiculously overpowered magic that can create, tear apart, and destroy space.

The only ones who can wield this formidable magic are the Astria family.

Ian didn't respond to my words.

"I will provide you with a meal once a day. If you decide to listen to me, let the one who brings the meal know."

He simply stated his terms and began to walk out.

I stared intently at Ian's retreating figure.

"Sigh…"

A sigh escaped me, but deep down, I felt slightly relieved.

Just the fact that Ian wasn't guarding this place meant there was a chance I could escape.

However, there was a problem.

"Where on earth am I?"

I did ask Luna to come and save me, but there was no way to tell her about this location.

The person bringing the food is obviously one of Ian's men.

So, I couldn't ask them for any help.

"But can they just leave me like this?"

Upon thinking, the only barrier in front of me was a set of iron bars.

In this situation, I could easily escape using magic.

And yet they just leave me like this?

I clenched my fist.

There's probably some sort of mechanism in place given how confidently he left me.

I looked at the iron bars.

And began to gather mana in my fist.

I don't know what mechanism they've set up, but there's a difference between trying and not trying.

"Phew…"

Gathering mana in my fist…

I swung.

My fist made direct contact with the bars.

And then…

-CLANG

"Ah… AAAAAAAAAAHH!"

It hurt.

The sound from my fist was like bones breaking.

"Ugh… Hic…"

Holding the hand that struck the bars, I wiped away the tears that trickled down.

It hurt so much.

So much…

CHAPTER 90
WINTER VACATION (6)

Three days had passed since Rudy and Rie left the Academy.

Alone, Luna was doing her research in Rudy's room.

"Hmm…"

Despite Rudy's absence, Luna was able to continue her research in his room since he had left his keys behind.

Luna stared intently at a piece of paper on which she had drawn a magic circle.

"It seems like it's somewhat complete…"

A magic circle to calm the user when an elemental rampage occurs - magic that restores one's mind and mana to their normal state.

Luna had managed to create such a magic circle.

However, there was a problem.

The magic circle could be activated, but she didn't know how effective the magic circle was.

She couldn't test it by herself.

Of course, even if Rudy or Rie were present, she wouldn't be able to use them for experimentation either.

Still, it needed to be tested somehow.

There was a significant difference between a spell whose effects have been confirmed and one that hasn't.

She couldn't declare it complete even after creating it.

"Five days, huh…"

The time Rudy had told her to wait.

Luna was worried.

The words Rudy spoke when he was going to the capital.

He told her he didn't know what would happen to him and if something did, she should ask for help from the professors.

"Hmm…"

Luna rose from her seat.

"I've done quite a bit, maybe I should take a break."

Muttering to herself, Luna walked towards her own room.

As she returned to her room and was about to open the door, she took a quick glance at the wall next to the door.

Attached to the wall next to the door was a mailbox for each student.

She could see a single letter in the mailbox.

"Is it from Rudy?"

It had only been three days, but if Rudy had written a reply as soon as he received her letter, it would have arrived by now.

Luna took the letter out of the mailbox and looked at the sender's name.

The sender's name was clearly written as Rudy Astria.

"Oh…!"

Though she had not seen him for only three days, she was overjoyed to see his name.

Luna quickly took the letter into her room.

She then picked up the letter opener on her desk and opened the letter.

"Let's see…”

-

As Luna read the letter,

"…”

Her expression grew darker with each word she read.

"What… what is this?"

The letter explained that he would have to stay at the mansion for a while, and he would probably only be able to see her after the break.

Luna read the letter again.

The content did not change, no matter how many times she read it.

However, she could understand one thing.

“…this isn't Rudy."

Luna had seen Rudy for a year.

Not just his face, they had been studying together continuously for a year.

So, she often saw Rudy's handwriting and was familiar with his writing habits.

Of course, this letter showed those habits.

But, it wasn't perfect.

The reason Luna could tell was that Rudy's handwriting was distinctive.

Rudy's handwriting wasn't blocky and straight. It fluttered around freely like cursive.

That was a distinctive feature of Rudy's handwriting.

Rudy's handwriting was so bad that there were times when even he couldn't recognize his own writing.

But this letter…

"It's too legible…!"

Well-written text is usually easy to replicate.

Most of the time, if you tried your best to write neatly, it would somewhat resemble the original.

However, bad handwriting was impossible to mimic.

A scribble so terrible that no one else could replicate it.

Rudy was at that level of penmanship.

Luna abruptly stood up from her seat.

She reached a conclusion.

This letter was not sent by Rudy.

Something had surely happened to him.

Luna didn't waste any time and immediately left the room.

There was no time to delay when Rudy was in potential danger.

“……Vacation?"

"Yes, Professor Cromwell is taking over as Vice Principal, so he won't be at the academy during the holidays."

Luna's eyes widened at the assistant's words.

"Oh……”

The words Rudy had said.

The suggestion to seek help from either Professor Cromwell or Professor Robert.

However, neither of them were currently available.

Typically, professors, despite the holidays, are required to be at the academy at least once, either in the morning or afternoon on weekdays.

Being a professor is not just about teaching students, but also conducting research, so they often stay at the academy even during the holidays.

But, as Luna just learned, Professor Cromwell was on vacation, and for some reason, Professor Robert was in the Fred territory.

Even if she accepted Professor Cromwell's absence, Luna never imagined that Professor Robert would be unavailable as well.

"Ah…… Thank you."

"Yeah, take care."

After bidding the assistant goodbye, Luna stepped outside.

She then stood still, looking up at the ceiling.

"Oh……”

None of the people Rudy had suggested to ask for help were available.

And going to the capital alone was problematic.

Infiltrating the Astria household alone, without knowing Rudy's condition, was practically suicide.

"Oh, what should I do?"

Luna frowned where she stood.

She slowly considered who else she could ask for help.

Astina?

Astina would definitely help, but it could take too long, and there were various constraints.

Astina was a talent that the entire empire was currently focusing on.

If such a person suddenly visits the Astria family, it would draw everyone's attention.

Once people's attention is drawn, there would be no opportunity to rescue Rudy.

The Astria family was not an easy target to begin with.

Then……

"Maybe Rie……”

Rie seemed most suitable.

Firstly, being in the capital already gave her a geographical advantage.

However, just herself and Rie would be insufficient.

If Rie was there, they could flee towards the royal palace while escaping with Rudy, so safety was assured if they could just rescue him.

But the rescue itself was the problem.

It was nearly impossible to infiltrate the Astria family with just herself and Rie.

While Luna was lost in thought, a voice came from the side.

"Luna, it's been a while."

Luna turned her head towards the voice.

“…Oh! Professor?"

The owner of the voice was Professor McGuire.

"I thought you had gone home since I haven't seen you recently, but it seems that's not the case."

Professor McGuire said, giving Luna a slight smile.

Seeing him, Luna's face lit up.

And then she spoke up.

"Professor!!!"

"Hm?"

Taken aback by Luna's sudden exclamation, Professor McGuire tilted his head.

That's when Luna asked him.

"Could you please help me?"

-

In Professor McGuire's research office.

"Here, Luna, it's a warm cup of tea. It must have been cold outside. This tea is quite famous in the north…"

"Luna! I baked these cookies myself! Give them a try!"

"Oh, thank you…!"

Luna had followed Professor McGuire into his office.

But as soon as Luna entered, the assistants who had been wearing haggard expressions widened their eyes in surprise.

Suddenly, their faces lit up, they began rummaging through their bags or sprinting off in various directions.

Soon, they began offering gifts to Luna.

From cookies and desserts to warm tea, and even magical tools.

Various items were presented to her.

Luna scratched her cheek with an awkward smile.

"Ahaha…"

She was wondering how to handle this situation and why they were behaving like this in the first place.

While Luna was lost in thought, Professor McGuire took a seat across from her.

"I'm sorry, I had something to take care of."

"No, not at all! It's not like we set up an appointment."

Looking at Luna, Professor McGuire smiled and then glanced at the assistants who were peering at them from a distance.

"Everyone, out. I have something to discuss with Luna."

"Understood, Professor!"

Upon McGuire's order, the assistants quickly left the office.

McGuire watched them leave and chuckled as if he found the situation absurd.

"They should be that energetic when conducting research…"

"Hmm?"

"It's nothing. So, how can I assist you today?"

At Professor McGuire's question, Luna nervously fiddled with her fingers.

"Well… a friend of mine is in a bit of trouble…"

"Trouble?"

Professor McGuire furrowed his brows at Luna's words.

"If it's dangerous, wouldn't it be better to ask the security personnel or the investigators for help instead of me?"

"Well… the situation is a bit complicated for that…”

Listening to Luna's response, McGuire crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, stroking his chin in contemplation.

"I take it you're talking about Rudy."

"Huh! How did you know?"

Luna was taken aback by McGuire's insight.

He chuckled at her surprised reaction.

"Heh, with age comes wisdom."

McGuire picked up a cookie from the pile in front of Luna and popped it into his mouth.

"What kind of help are you hoping for?"

Listening to McGuire, Luna began to explain the situation, including her concerns about Rudy who seemed to be in trouble after going to the capital.

As he listened to her story, McGuire continued to stroke his chin thoughtfully.

"That's quite a headache."

"Yes… It's all based on circumstantial evidence, so we don't really have any concrete proof…”

Luna's voice trailed off as she lowered her head.

"Well, you're not one to make things up, and you must have some level of certainty to have sought my help."

"Yes… I may not know much, but I'm sure something has happened to Rudy."

At Luna's words, McGuire nodded in understanding.

"However, I can only provide indirect assistance. If I confront the Astria family head-on, it's not just me; many people around me will be troubled too."

"I understand……”

"But."

Professor Mcguire wore a sly grin.

"I am an expert in such indirect assistance."

McGuire stood up from his seat and grabbed the coat hanging on the rack.

Luna cocked her head at McGuire's actions.

"What are you doing?"

"Hmm?"

McGuire gestured towards the door with his chin.

"You said it's urgent, didn't you? We should leave right away."

"What… what do you mean……”

Luna spoke as if she didn't quite understand.

"Let's leave for the capital immediately. Pack only the essentials."

Luna's eyes widened at his words.

"Really? Thank you! Professor! I will never forget this kindness!"

"Yes, make sure you never forget~."

Professor Mcguire said, his face lit up with a playful smile.

CHAPTER 91
WINTER VACATION (7)

Luna hastily packed her belongings and set off for the heart of the empire with Professor Mcguire.

The heart of the Empire.

The Royal Capital.

Luna had never been there before.

Frankly, there was no reason for a child from a minor noble family like Luna to visit the capital.

She might have visited once or twice if she had relatives in the capital, but there was no one in Luna's family living there.

The idea of going to the capital for the first time made Luna's heart flutter, but she focused first on her purpose of going there.

She had to save Rudy.

Anxiety welled up at the thought of possibly having to fight against Ian Astria, the current greatest talent in the Empire, if things went awry.

However, while she was anxious, she was not afraid.

The fact that Professor Mcguire was by her side gave her a strong sense of security.

Lost in her thoughts, Luna's eyes drifted towards the bag that Professor Mcguire was holding.

This wasn't a typical leather bag; it was a metal one with locks.

Unable to curb her curiosity, Luna voiced her question.

"Professor, what's in that bag?"

"Oh, it's a bag containing magic tools and a few scrolls."

At this, Luna tilted her head.

Wouldn't a standard leather bag be more practical?

A metal bag would be heavy and limiting in mobility.

Still, considering its contents, the sturdiness of a metal bag made sense.

She let the thought pass.

"Oh, right."

Luna clapped her hands and rummaged through her bag.

"Professor, could you take a look at this magic circle for me?"

"Magic circle?"

At Luna's words, Mcguire showed interest.

Luna took a piece of paper out of her bag.

The magic circle she had completed today was drawn on that paper.

It was a magic circle related to mental purification and mana stabilization.

Mcguire looked closely at the magic circle.

And a satisfied smile crossed his face.

Typically, looking at a complicated magic circle might evoke feelings of inadequacy or even despair.

However, that wasn't the case with Luna's magic circle.

Luna's magic circle was one that could make any wizard who researched magic

circles feel good.

The runes drawn on the magic circle gave a round and gentle aura, reminiscent of Luna herself.

Additionally, despite the circle's seemingly simple design, the underlying formulas were precise and thorough, making it pleasant to analyze.

However, it wasn't without its issues.

There were still many things Luna lacked.

"You need to rework this part and this control formula. If you rearrange the circuits that could become obstacles inward while maintaining the overall structure, it will be a better magic circle."

Mcguire pointed out the details of the magic circle with his finger and said.

"Oh……"

Luna looked in awe at Mcguire's detailed feedback.

Mcguire smiled at her, saying,

"But you've improved a lot. The overall structure of the magic circle is much better than before. As always, the internal formulas are written best."

"Hehe…… thank you."

Luna scratched her head shyly.

"Well, it seems like it only needs a little modification. I could fix it here, but then your skills won't improve. Try doing it yourself."

"Yes! I got it!"

Luna replied in a cheerful voice.

"Oh, but shouldn't we start writing a letter to Rie soon."

"Oh! Right."

Inside the carriage, Luna and Mcguire came up with a plan.

Rie's help was essential for that plan.

Without Rie, the plan itself could collapse, so they needed to ask for help quickly.

Luna took out the letter paper she had brought and began to write.

-

In Rie's room,

"Hmm……"

Rie was grappling with a magic circle.

The magic circle she was working on was for sealing elementals, specifically designed to suppress rampaging ones.

However, there was a problem.

There were various methods to suppress an elemental.

One could reverse summon it, or revert it to its original sane state.

Of all these methods, the first she opted for was the reverse summoning technique.

Considering Luna's likely approach to crafting the magic circle, reverting the elemental to its original state would have been the best.

But doing so was extremely challenging, especially for beings that were not human.

For both Rie and Luna, this was a field that was still difficult to grasp.

"This is frustrating……"

Rie groaned, still holding the magic circle.

No matter how she looked at it, she wasn't satisfied.

Neither the magic circle itself nor the elemental control formula within met her expectations.

As Rie was mumbling to herself, there was a knock on her door.

"Ah, come in."

At Rie's words, the maid opened the door and entered.

"Your Highness, some letters have arrived."

Rie glanced at the maid at her words.

The maid held numerous letters.

It was almost the end of the year, so many were sending letters with well-wishes for the upcoming one.

Others were invitations to balls held at the beginning of the new year.

Without paying much attention to the letters, Rie's gaze returned to the magic circle.

"Just tell me who sent them, roughly."

"Yes, understood."

The maid naturally began to read out the names of the families on the letters.

"This is a letter sent by the eldest son of the Zeki family."

"Next."

"A letter sent by the head of the Ribal family…"

"Next."

"…Family's--"

"Next."

Like this, Rie kept on calling out 'next' without listening properly.

"A letter sent by the eldest daughter of the Railer family…"

"Next."

"And then…"

"Hold on."

Rie set down the magic circle she was looking at and turned to the maid.

"Who sent it?"

The maid, looking a little confused, checked the letter again.

"It's from the Railer family."

"Let me see that."

Rie said, rising from her seat.

The maid handed over the letter, though she was puzzled.

She had never heard of the Railer family before.

Several question marks popped up in her head.

Rie, noticing her perplexed expression, extended her hand.

"Huh?"

The maid tilted her head at Rie's sudden gesture.

"A knife, give me a knife. I need it to open the letter."

"Ah, ah."

The maid was surprised.

She hadn't brought a letter opener since Rie had never shown interest in reading the letters before.

"I-I'm sorry!!! I'll bring it right away!!!"

The maid bowed several times and ran out of the room.

"Hmm……”

Rie's expression soured as she watched the maid's frantic exit.

To be honest, there was nobody who would fault her for punishing that maid, but she didn't particularly want to.

She soon shook her head.

"Sylph, please neatly open this letter."

She thought it would be better to just bring out an elemental and have it open the letter.

Sylph delicately brought out a blade of wind and sliced the letter.

Rie carefully pulled out the letter contained in the torn envelope.

And she began to read it slowly.

-

A moment later,

"Your Highness! I apologize!!!"

"No, it's fine."

Then Rie casually collected the magic circle she had been agonizing over.

"I have somewhere to go for a bit."

"Wha-, where to?"

The maid was greatly surprised.

"I'm just going to step outside for a moment."

"Are you visiting one of the noble families? Should I arrange a carriage and some knights…?"

"No, I'll be going discreetly. Don't make a scene."

"Oh, understood. Then I'll call some of the other maids…"

Assuming Rie was leaving, the maid naturally thought to call others to help Rie get ready.

"No, I said not to make a fuss."

However, Rie rejected this as well.

"I'm… I'm sorry."

Looking at the maid, Rie let out a sigh and walked towards the closet.

"Just help me out a bit. I won't be dressing up much since I'll only be out briefly."

"Yes! Understood."

-

At that moment.

"What on earth is this?"

Bandaging my hand, I banged against the iron bars.

A few days ago, I had pounded on these bars with my fists and had ended up rolling on the floor in pain.

After a few hours of moaning in pain, a person in a hood came with food.

However, seeing my fist swollen red, they treated me and said,

"You should avoid such pointless acts. There's no escape from here."

This comment provoked me even more.

Who are they to tell me about whether I can get out or not?

Thus, I started studying the confines of this cell.

And I reached a conclusion.

"Mana cannot form properly here."

Within this space, mana dissipates constantly.

Whether trying to use any magic, or attempting to physically strengthen myself.

There was no way to handle mana within these bars.

In desperation, I even tried to summon Priscilla.

"Huff… It's been a while since I've been in the real world… what the?"

She materialized but then vanished instantly.

Even though Priscilla is controlled by my mental strength, she uses the mana within me to manifest.

Thus, she materialized and then instantly disappeared.

I muttered to the Priscilla within me.

"Priscilla, what do you think we should do?"

[You, who always told me not to speak, are now asking for my opinion?]

Priscilla retorted as if annoyed.

"I regret that as well, but it's just how it is."

To converse with Priscilla, I had to speak out loud.

Her voice, however, was unheard by those around.

As a result, when I talked with Priscilla, it looked like I was a madman talking to myself.

And since most of the time I was alone was spent studying, I told Priscilla I wouldn't be able to respond to her most of the time.

Initially, she would speak to me often, but after being continuously ignored, she stopped addressing me altogether.

"I have my own circumstances too."

And now, I am completely alone.

Feeling lonely by myself, I began to chat with Priscilla more.

[Haa… If I knew it was going to be like this, I would've contracted with Serina instead. This is truly the most regrettable decision of my elemental life.]

But every time I tried to talk, Priscilla would grumble at me.

She seemed upset, perhaps because I hadn't paid her enough attention in the past.

It was understandable.

"I… I'm sorry. I promise I'll call upon you more often."

[That's if we can get out of here.]

"Haa… Yes, if we get out……"

I stared hard at the iron bars.

CHAPTER 92
WINTER VACATION (8)

The following day.

Rie's room was bustling with maids from the morning.

The previous night, Rie had secretly ventured somewhere and upon her return, she instructed her maids,

“I will visit the Astria House tomorrow. Make sure everything is prepared.”

Her words had greatly surprised the maids.

It was well-known that Rie and the Astria family were on bad terms.

Although the students at the academy knew that she got along quite well with Rudy, such a rumor had not yet spread to the capital.

Rie, dressed in her finest, walked out.

As she exited the palace gates, a carriage awaited her, and beside it stood knights in full uniform.

“Alright, let's go.”

Rie said, and escorted by the knights, she climbed into the carriage.

A carriage with the royal crest etched on it and the knights in uniform signified a formal visit to the Astria household.

Though it was somewhat rude to announce a visit just a day in advance and then arrive with such fanfare, Rie didn’t seem to care.

Those around her were puzzled by her actions, but since Rie had decided on this course, they went along, ensuring everything proceeded without a hitch.

-

After some time passed.

The Astria mansion in the capital.

They were preparing a lavish banquet upon hearing the sudden news of Rie's visit.

In the midst of the chaos, Ian was lost in thought.

"Is she visiting because of Rudy?”

Rie was present when Rudy announced he was returning to the family.

In addition, he had heard rumors that Rie and Rudy were quite close at the academy.

Considering these facts, Ian had somewhat predicted this event to happen.

It was inevitable since they were close to the royal palace in the capital.

Still, imprisoning Rudy in the distant Astria territory, where their father resided, wasn’t an option either.

"My Lord Ian,"

Thomas approached, interrupting Ian's thoughts.

"Princess Rie has arrived."

Ian nodded slightly at his words.

"Understood. Let's go greet her."

With that, Ian walked towards the front of the mansion.

There, he saw Rie, who had arrived in a splendid outfit.

Ian approached Rie first and greeted her.

"Princess, welcome to the Astria mansion."

"Ah, Ian Astria. It's good to see you,"

Rie responded with a faint hint of disdain.

Few dared to show such an attitude toward the heir of the Astria House.

Though he was taken aback, Ian suppressed his discomfort.

For now, he was still only the Astria heir.

He could not treat the princess casually.

Not yet, at least.

"Well, shall we go inside?"

Ian spoke, but Rie did not move and tilted her head.

"Where's Rudy?"

"Ah, you are asking about Rudy."

At this, Ian smirked.

“Right now, Rudy is feeling unwell and is resting in bed.”

"Ah, is that so?"

Rie responded, feigning ignorance.

She then added,

“In that case, I should at least pay him a visit. Can you guide me?”

A moment of silence followed Rie's request.

She watched Ian closely, keen on observing his reaction.

However, Ian didn't show any signs of being flustered.

“He's contracted a contagious illness. I'm concerned that if you get too close, Your Highness might also fall ill.”

Rie frowned at his words.

“So, you're saying I can't even see his face?”

“I apologize. Based on the doctor's advice, even the servants are currently advised against approaching him.”

Rie nodded in understanding.

It would be somewhat unreasonable to insist on visiting if the doctor had given such instructions.

She chose to show understanding instead.

"Then, let's proceed inside."

Guided by Ian, Rie entered the mansion and headed towards the dining area.

A lavish feast was spread out in the dining area.

Rie and Ian took their seats and began their meal.

During the meal, Rie was the first to speak.

"Rudy, he's a nice friend."

Ian grimaced at Rie's comment.

Rudy, nice?

What an absurd statement, he thought.

Of course, the Astria family had tried their best to educate Rudy properly.

But despite their efforts, Rudy was still a mess.

Even if he didn't show it at the academy, Ian thought it was only a matter of time.

Nevertheless, he flashed a smile and responded.

"He is of the Astria family, after all."

Ian seemed to agree with Rie, but his tone implied that it was thanks to the Astria family's efforts that Rudy could present himself well.

Rie chuckled at his response.

"Well, receiving good guidance doesn't always equate to absorbing good lessons."

She gave Ian a teasing smile and continued,

"Just like how two people can receive the same education but they might not learn the same lessons."

A vein popped on Ian's forehead at her comment.

It was an implied criticism - 'While Rudy learned well, why haven't you?'

Ian was well aware that his achievements far surpassed Rudy's, a fact recognized by everyone.

Yet, here was Rie, implying that Rudy was superior to him.

Ian was about to retort, but swallowed his words.

Her indirect criticism would only put him in a difficult position if Rie chose to play innocent.

"Well… I am thankful that you think so highly of Rudy."

Ian gritted his teeth and forced a response.

Rie looked at him and giggled.

It was a smile of victory.

"Excuse me, I'll be right back."

Rie excused herself, a polite way of saying she needed to use the restroom.

Leaving her seat, she strolled around the mansion.

A maid followed her, but Rie didn't pay any mind to her.

"Oh, Princess Rie? This is…"

The maid guided Rie to the restroom, but Rie didn't stop there.

She kept walking.

"Princess Rie?"

Rie paused her steps for a moment and scanned her surroundings.

There was no one else around.

Rie looked at the maid with a smile.

"Well, can you tell me where Rudy's room is?"

After intimidating the maid in this manner, Rie began to run.

She was wearing a dress, which made it inconvenient to run, so she held up her skirt to prevent it from touching the ground.

"Is it there?"

After a quick run, she arrived near Rudy's room, pointed out by the maid.

As Rie reached the door, a voice called out from behind her.

"Princess Rie, where are you headed?"

Turning around, she saw Ian.

He greeted her with a knowing smile.

"Let's go back. Didn't I tell you about Rudy's condition earlier?"

Rie gave Ian a fleeting glance before abruptly making her way into Rudy's room.

"Rudy!"

She exclaimed as she pushed the door open.

But what met her eyes was…

"Huh?"

Rudy, soundly sleeping on the bed.

Ian walked up behind Rie, who was blankly staring at Rudy.

"Princess, what are you doing? What if you catch his disease?"

"This is…”

Before Rie could react further, Ian interjected,

"Look, Rudy is asleep. Let's not disturb him. Please, let's go back to the dining area."

Ian grinned knowingly.

The figure of Rudy she saw was an illusion—a magic Ian had prepared in advance.

The individual sleeping there was just a regular maid, temporarily put to sleep.

Ian had altered her appearance using illusion magic.

Ian had showcased this to the staff to make them believe Rudy was resting at home due to illness.

They all believed Rudy was recovering at the mansion.

Rie briefly looked at the illusion of Rudy before exiting the room.

"What made you act so recklessly?"

"Uh…”

Rie frowned deeply, clearly not pleased.

Ian looked content.

It would take at least 10 minutes for someone of Rie's level to realize it was illusion magic.

"Let's go back."

Ian took the lead and guided Rie back to the dining area.

She followed, a hint of frustration evident.

And then, a sly smile graced Rie's lips.

Everything seemed to be going according to plan.

-

“Professor, Rie has set off.”

Luna reported, eyeing the carriage bearing the royal crest.

"Alright, let's get started as well."

Opening his iron suitcase, Professor Mcguire pulled out and tore a scroll.

With that action, a dove enveloped in a bright light appeared.

"Show us where Rudy Astria is."

At his command, the dove slowly ascended, circling in the sky as if beckoning them to follow.

“Let’s go, Luna.”

“Yes, Professor.”

The plan of Luna, Rie, and Professor Mcguire wasn't to confirm whether Rudy was at the Astria manor.

They already knew that Rudy was not in the manor.

The reason Rie went to the Astria mansion was to lure Ian into complacency.

They aimed to make it appear as if even those close to Rudy still weren't aware of his whereabouts.

That's why she headed to the mansion.

But in truth, they had a general idea of where Rudy was.

While they didn't know his exact location, they were certain he wasn't at the Astria mansion.

Among the various magical tools in Professor Mcguire's possession, several could locate a person.

This included the dove they just utilized, and other tools that could confirm the direction of the person sought.

So, the moment they arrived in the capital, they knew Rudy wasn't at the Astria mansion.

While they had a rough idea of Rudy's location, there was a problem.

There was a risk that Ian might find out they were trying to rescue Rudy.

Even with Professor Mcguire with her, a direct confrontation with Ian wasn't an option.

Even if Mcguire were to truly engage in battle, there was no guarantee of victory over Ian, and any fight would assuredly result in heavy losses.

They orchestrated a plan where Rie would divert Ian's attention, while Luna and Professor Mcguire would rescue Rudy.

If Rie officially visited the Astria family in the royal carriage, Ian couldn't casually leave his position.

And there, while Rie was pretending to be ignorant of Rudy's whereabouts.

They'd use the opportunity to rescue Rudy.

It was a diversionary tactic.

"Luna, this way."

"Yes, Professor!"

With that, Luna and Professor Mcguire sprinted towards where Rudy was.

CHAPTER 93
WINTER VACATION (9)

The glowing dove pointed towards the outskirts of the capital.

A remote area devoid of people.

Luna ran alongside Professor Mcguire.

“Huff… Huff…”

Luna was out of breath from running for so long.

“Luna, we're almost there. Hang on just a bit longer.”

“Huff… Okay!”

Luna replied energetically to Mcguire's encouragement.

They approached a small forest located on the outskirts of the capital.

But the forest gave off a somewhat eerie vibe.

Perhaps because of winter, there were no leaves on the trees, just bare, withered branches.

Navigating through the trees, they spotted a decrepit hut that looked almost abandoned.

The glowing dove circled above the hut.

“Is this the place?”

Professor Mcguire reached out towards the sky.

The hovering dove flew into his hand and vanished.

Swallowing hard, Luna slowly approached the hut.

Just then, Mcguire extended his hand to stop her.

“Luna, wait for a moment.”

“Yes?”

Luna tilted her head in response to Mcguire's statement.

“Hmm…”

Mcguire intently observed the hut.

"A magical alarm, huh."

There was a magic setup.

However, it wasn't just one spell.

There were others as well.

The entire hut felt like it was enveloped in a magical circle.

It seemed to function like a magical artifact itself.

Mcguire reached out to feel the mana flowing within the hut.

He could discern two or three distinct magic circles inscribed within, but the mana flowing within was unusual.

“Hmm…”

Mcguire pondered.

If they entered the hut, Ian Astria would likely become aware of it.

And they didn't know what the interior of the hut looked like, but if they fought inside, it would be a greatly disadvantaged battle.

But the hut itself didn't seem to pose a danger.

Mcguire made up his mind.

“Luna, you should go in alone.”

“Huh?”

Luna looked at Mcguire, surprised.

"There is nothing inside that would threaten your life. There are no people inside either. So, you don't need to worry too much."

"But, Professor…”

"I will block the one who will come here."

Professor Mcguire opened his briefcase and took out several magic tools.

"Don't worry about me, once you find Rudy, escape quickly."

Luna found herself at a loss for words.

The only person she could think of who might approach the hut was Ian Astria.

Was Mcguire saying he'd fend off Ian?

Silent, Luna trusted Mcguire, but the idea of him taking on such a risk for her sake left her speechless.

Seeing Luna's conflicted expression, Mcguire grinned.

“Luna, what's the advantage of a wizard who uses magical circles?”

“Pardon?”

Luna was taken aback by Mcguire's sudden question.

“Understanding your opponent, knowing oneself, and preparing accordingly—that's where our true strength lies,”

Mcguire commented, gently tapping Luna's head.

"I'm in the best position to maximize that advantage right now. So don't worry."

Luna clenched her fist, looking up at him,

“Professor, please be careful. I'll see you later.”

She bowed gracefully, bending her waist in a neat 90-degree angle as a sign of respect, and then dashed into the hut.

Watching her retreating figure, a fleeting smile crossed Professor Mcguire's face, but it soon turned somber.

He began to take out one, then two magical tools.

Ian Astria.

He had observed the young man's abilities and temperament a few times when he was attending the academy.

Of course, at that time, he couldn't use space magic, but it didn't matter.

Even with the usage of space magic, there wouldn't be much difference.

After all, he wouldn't let Ian get the kind of environment where he could fight effectively.

Armed with his array of magical tools, Mcguire slowly rose from his seat, murmuring,

"Maybe it's time to deal with that brat."

-

At the Astria mansion in the capital, Ian was blissfully unaware of the unfolding events, enjoying tea with Princess Rie.

Their conversation seemed casual and relaxed.

Still, Rie looked somewhat uneasy.

Ian believed he had flawlessly hidden information about Rudy.

Rie, inside, was smiling, deeply satisfied.

She knew everything Ian was trying to hide.

She was merely putting on an act, a performance filled with her utmost dedication.

But Ian, oblivious, responded with a smile of his own.

"Heh…"

As he moved to take a sip from his tea cup,

Thud.

The noise wasn't from their surroundings.

It was a resonation of his own mana.

The cabin where Rudy was imprisoned.

Someone had intruded.

Who could it be?

Ian's gaze met Rie's, who appeared just as bothered as before.

Ian was perplexed.

How could this happen when Princess Rie, who should be searching for Rudy, was sitting right here clueless?

But he quickly made up his mind.

The fact remained that someone had intruded on the hut, and regardless of their connection to Princess Rie, they had to be dealt with.

Normally, Ian would have sent Thomas or someone else, but something felt off.

The unexpected visit from Rie combined with the intrusion of the cabin felt too contradictory, increasing his sense of unease.

Ultimately, Ian decided he needed to personally investigate.

"Princess, I must step out briefly."

"You have to leave?"

Rie asked, as if clueless.

"Yes, a small matter has come up."

"Why would you leave me alone here?"

Rie frowned, clearly displeased.

Leaving a guest unattended, even for a bathroom break, was obviously considered rude.

"I apologize. Can I ask for just a moment of your patience?"

Annoyed, Ian bowed slightly.

"Is it something within the mansion you need to attend to?"

When Rie posed the question, Ian paused for a moment before nodding,

"Yes, I just need to briefly visit my office."

"Well, please be quick. I'll wait."

After giving a brief bow to Rie, Ian exited the room.

"What a hassle."

He muttered under his breath.

He couldn’t leave Rie alone for too long.

However, Ian figured a brief check wouldn’t hurt.

"Teleport."

Ian's space magic.

It allowed him to instantly move to a desired location.

With this spell, he believed he could quickly check on the cabin and return quickly.

No matter who the opponent might be, all Ian needed to do was suppress them forcefully and quickly return.

Ian's body emitted a faint light and attempted to teleport towards the hut.

No, he tried to move towards the hut.

"Huh?"

However, the place he found himself in was a white room.

There was no sign of the hut, nor any trees.

Even looking up, there was no sight of the sun.

He was simply surrounded by white walls.

An entirely empty, white room.

"What's going on?"

Ian's brow furrowed.

He had clearly intended to move in front of the cabin, there was no issue with that.

There was absolutely no reason he would've ended up in this peculiar room.

Then there was only one explanation.

"An illusion?"

Ian let out a sarcastic laugh.

With a low voice, Ian muttered,

"Just what are you trying to achieve with this kind of illusion?"

He then slowly approached one of the walls.

"Who's behind this? Are you with Princess Rie?"

As he approached the wall, something began to materialize from it.

A familiar face appeared before him.

"Principal McDowell?"

Suddenly, the image of Principal McDowell appeared and glared at Ian.

Taken aback by the unexpected appearance of McDowell, Ian's expression darkened.

McDowell looked at Ian and spoke with a hint of pity.

"You really haven't changed, have you?"

His gaze seemed a mix of pity and regret.

Ian clenched his fists in response.

"Who are you to say that?"

Ian's voice was thick with anger.

"I have changed. I've become strong enough to fight and defeat someone like you."

McDowell shook his head in response.

"Ian Astria. You may have grown stronger. But, that's not what's important."

Ian continued to glare at McDowell, fists clenched tight.

He was about to retort, but then he paused, a smirk forming on his lips.

"Sigh…”

Taking a deep breath, Ian quickly realized the situation.

This was an illusion.

This McDowell wasn't the real Principal McDowell he knew.

Ian came to a conclusion.

"A well-crafted illusion indeed. Created by someone who knows of my conversations with McDowell…”

Ian reached out his hand.

"However, an illusion remains just that."

Ian's mana surged powerfully, and magic erupted from his hand.

"Let's see if this illusion can withstand my magic."

Ian smirked confidently.

"Space Rift."

With a loud crack, the space around McDowell seemed to fracture.

Not only that, but the fracture began to spread, causing the surroundings to crack and split.

As if it was about to shatter the space itself.

It was a spell that directly damaged the very fabric of space.

The fracture continued to expand, tearing apart the image of McDowell and leaving significant cracks in the white room.

"Ha!"

Looking at the torn image of McDowell, Ian let out a triumphant laugh.

However, that brief moment of laughter was fleeting.

Something was wrong.

Only the illusion of McDowell had been shattered, and the surrounding environment remained unchanged.

Ordinarily, if such a powerful spell was used, the surrounding illusions would disappear.

Yet, they stayed.

"What's going on?"

Ian was puzzled as he saw the space rift gradually mending itself.

And then he noticed something even more peculiar.

The magic he had used, the space rift, had paused halfway through its mending process.

"Why is this happening?"

Ian frowned deeply.

The space rift spell, as its name suggested, momentarily caused a crack in space.

Even if this rift was made, the recuperative power of space was immensely strong, healing almost immediately.

Of course, anyone caught within this rift would have been torn apart by it.

Yet, the magic he'd just used seemed to be mending slower than usual, until it stopped, leaving a visible crack in space.

With a furrowed brow, Ian approached the crack, reaching out with a finger to touch

it.

Crack.

"What the…?!"

Upon his touch, the crack expanded rapidly.

The entirety of the white room Ian was trapped in began to fracture.

The entire space trembled violently.

"Gah…!"

The ground and ceiling started to sway and shake drastically.

Ian, unable to maintain his balance, stumbled.

And then the ground beneath him began to fracture.

"No way…!!!"

The ground beneath Ian started to crumble, breaking apart from the center outwards.

Ian, disregarding the illusion and everything else, rushed towards the edges of the white room.

However, the ground was crumbling faster than he could run.

"Aghhh!!!"

Ian began to fall, plunging into a vast abyss of darkness.

-

Meanwhile, amidst this chaos…

"Phew…”

Around the area, broken trees littered the scene.

Next to it, Professor Mcguire let out a sigh of relief.

He had narrowly escaped being engulfed by Ian's spatial magic.

"That was close."

Mcguire smiled.

Lying around him were countless magic tools besides the shattered trees.

These were the tools he'd used to deceive Ian.

Fighting head-on would have risked his identity being exposed, and the damage could have been significant.

So, Mcguire's plan was to deceive Ian using illusion magic.

A very meticulous plan.

McGuire had a rough idea about Ian's space magic.

He knew it could allow for instant long-distance travel, and create a crack in space.

So, he decided to counter the 'Teleport'.

Mcguire had set up a magic tool that directed surrounding coordinates to one specific location.

To utilize the 'Teleportation' spell, one first designates spatial coordinates to specify the destination.

It's essentially magic that sets coordinates.

While space magic can set such coordinates, there are countless other magic that can do the same.

So, there's no shortage of magic tools designed to counteract such spells.

Next, he decided to counter 'Space Rift' magic.

To trick Ian into using this spell, he decided to project an illusion of Principal McDowell.

Ian held immense pride in his strength.

However, Ian had once been shocked when McDowell told him at the academy that strength alone would get him nothing.

It was a traumatic experience for Ian.

If the illusionary McDowell said something similar, it would provoke Ian.

Then Ian would use his strongest spell, as if to refute the notion that power alone wasn't everything.

And everything went as predicted.

In the end, Mcguire, activated a previously set magic tool.

This device was placed at the center of the area where the illusion spell was being cast.

It was a straightforward tool, engraved with the basic earth magic spell, 'Dig', designed simply to excavate the ground.

When Ian used his space magic, Mcguire would activate this device.

In an instant, the earth was dug up, and Ian found himself plummeting into the darkness.

"Little brat. What's the use of just being strong?"

Mcguire laughed, peering down into the pit.

CHAPTER 94
WINTER VACATION (10)

"What's this?"

Luna looked around with a puzzled expression as she entered the cabin.

Upon stepping inside, she saw a completely ordinary household interior.

A kitchen and a dining table were present, just like any typical home.

However, the place looked as though it had been abandoned for years.

Spiderwebs spanned the shelves in the kitchen with rats scurrying about.

The dining table was broken, its wooden fragments scattered all over.

“Rudy…?”

Luna cautiously scanned the cabin's interior.

A cursory glance revealed nothing suspicious.

“Could there be a secret passage or something?”

There was no immediate sign of anything like that.

So how was she supposed to find it?

Luna recalled a method she had learned when she was about ten years old, during her mischievous days.

It was about finding hidden things.

“Wind Cutter!”

Bang!

“Wind Blast!”

Crash!

The method was quite straightforward: simply break everything in sight.

If something was hidden, destroying things would reveal it.

It was like tipping a basket to find something at its bottom rather than searching through its contents.

As she was wreaking havoc inside, Luna noticed something.

"Huh?”

A random spell hit the bed, breaking it and revealing a hole beneath it.

Luna smiled.

It was such a cliché hiding spot.

“Rudy…!”

She quickly cleared the debris from the bed to get a better view of the hole.

Stone steps leading downwards came into view.

“Ignite!”

She conjured a flame with her magic to illuminate the passage.

While the magic did shed some light, she couldn't see all the way to the bottom.

“I guess… I have to go down?”

Luna was apprehensive, but she had no other choice.

Using the flame to light her way, she began her descent.

A few steps in, Luna sensed something was off.

Flick!

“Huh?”

Suddenly, her spell extinguished with a soft sound.

“Why did that happen?”

Luna tried to use the spell again in panic, but nothing changed.

“Ignite!”

Flick!

No matter how many times she tried, the outcome remained the same.

“Ugh…”

In the dark stairwell, where she couldn’t see even an inch ahead, and with her magic rendered useless, fear began to grip her heart.

Placing one hand on her chest and the other against the wall, Luna carefully continued her descent.

"_____.”

Suddenly, she began hearing faint whispers.

“Wha…?”

It sounded like a human voice.

Luna remembered Professor Mcguire’s words: He had mentioned that no one else was here except Rudy.

So why was she hearing voices?

A feeling of dread washed over Luna.

“Who… who's there?”

She asked cautiously.

However, her voice was so faint from fear that it barely came out.

“Don’t do that ——!”

Suddenly, a louder voice echoed, as if someone was in conversation with another.

"Who…?"

Even if it was Rudy's voice, there was no one for Rudy to talk to here.

Because there was no one else in this place.

Could it be…

Luna thought.

It had been about three days since Rudy disappeared.

Being alone in such a dark space could slowly deteriorate one's sanity, or so she had heard.

For one's mental well-being, it was essential to see some light and interact with people.

However, the current situation was incredibly bleak, devoid of any stimuli.

Due to its underground location, the air was also damp and carried a musty scent.

In that case…

Alarmed by her realization, Luna began to descend.

"Ru-, Rudy! Rudy!"

Luna hurriedly made her way down the staircase.

As she did, a voice grew clearer and more distinct.

It was unmistakably Rudy's voice.

"No! That's not how the rules work!"

Rules?

The words she heard made no sense to her.

Then, his voice rang out again.

"That's the fun part! The process of overcoming your opponent!"

The tone sounded agitated.

Hearing Rudy's voice like that, Luna felt tears well up.

Rudy… Rudy…!

She rushed down the stairs.

Suddenly, instead of another step, the ground leveled out.

"Ah!"

Luna's foot caught on the unexpected flat surface.

She lost her balance and, with a thud, landed on the ground.

"Ouch… That hurts…”

Rubbing her wounded hand, Luna looked up.

"Luna…?"

Then she heard Rudy's voice.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she recognized shapes in the dimness.

"Rudy!!"

Rudy was confined behind a set of iron bars.

And surprisingly, he was sitting there, looking relatively fine.

“…Huh?"

However, what he was doing seemed strange.

Holding a small stone in his hand, he was scribbling something on the floor as if he was writing.

It appeared as if he was marking scores, almost like he was playing a game.

"Ru-, Rudy…”

Seeing this, Luna's face fell.

"I'm so sorry…!!! I should have come sooner…!!"

With teary eyes, Luna approached the bars.

Rudy, seeing her emotional state, looked bewildered.

"Lu-, Luna! What's wrong? Calm down!"

"Sob… I'm sorry, Rudy…”

"What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

Locked behind the bars, Rudy could only look on with a stunned expression, unable to console her.

-

"So, this game is called 'Number Baseball'."

[Baseball? What's that?]

"Ah, the name isn’t that important."

I was preparing a game to play with Priscilla.

Fortunately, I found a small pebble on the ground and thought of a few games that could be played with it.

Initially, Priscilla and I just chatted, but there's only so much you can talk about.

"So, you write a number here…”

I began to slowly explain the rules of the game to Priscilla.

However, the response I got was entirely unexpected.

[Why go through such a process?]

"Huh? Because it's fun?"

[Do humans find that amusing? Why not just tell each other the answers from the beginning? That way, you can enjoy more games quickly.]

I was taken aback by Priscilla's perspective.

Trying to persuade her, I explained,

"If we do that, we can't determine a winner or loser. It's fun when you beat your opponent."

[Is that so? Then I'll just tell you my answer. I doubt I'll find much joy in winning anyway.]

"No! That's not how the rules work!"

It was at that moment that I deeply felt the difference between elementals like Priscilla and humans.

[Sigh, you humans and your tedious games.]

I could sense a hint of exasperation in Priscilla's voice, but I continued,

"That's the fun part! The process of overcoming your opponent!"

[Sigh… Alright.]

Why couldn't she understand?

Suddenly, I heard hurried footsteps approaching, the sound echoing as if someone was quickly descending the stairs.

Was someone coming?

I paused my conversation with Priscilla and turned to look at the stairs.

As I did, a figure rushed down the steps.

"Eek!"

The person descended swiftly but tripped on the last step, tumbling to the floor with a thud.

I focused on the person's face and clothes, recognition lighting up my face.

"Luna…?"

"Rudy!!!"

Luna burst into tears.

"I'm so sorry…!!! I should have come sooner…!!!"

"Lu-Luna! Calm down! What's going on?"

…A brief moment of chaos ensued.

After consoling Luna, I updated her about my situation, and she filled me in on hers.

"Aha… You were talking to Priscilla, the elemental…?"

Luna chuckled awkwardly, a hint of embarrassment on her face.

"Yeah… I usually avoided speaking with her in public because of how people might react…"

[Humans really do worry about the strangest things.]

"It's the elementals who are peculiar, not humans."

I retorted, slightly annoyed by Priscilla's comment.

"Huh?"

Luna tilted her head, looking at me with curiosity.

"Ah, never mind. Priscilla just made a comment."

"I see."

Luna nodded understandingly.

"For now, let me get you out of there!"

With that, Luna extended her hand towards the iron bars.

“Wind Cutter!”

With a whoosh, a sound reminiscent of air escaping from a balloon echoed.

From Luna's hand, instead of a blade of wind shooting forth, there was only a feeble gust.

“Sigh…”

“Huh?”

Luna looked confused.

Seeing her like this, I spoke up,

“Luna, listen closely. Magic can’t be used here.”

“Can't use magic…? Oh right, when I was descending…”

Luna, as if she had realized something, clapped her hands together.

“So… how do we get out of here?”

Luna stared at me intently, seeking an answer.

“In truth, the best way would be to bring something from outside to cut through these iron bars…”

However, that was nearly an impossible option.

In this world, using magic was the most efficient method to cut through such iron.

So, finding a tool to cut these bars would take a very long amount of time.

We didn't have that kind of time.

According to Luna, Professor Mcguire was outside, holding Ian.

We needed to escape, and fast.

“…Luna, I've…”

While being trapped here, I’d thought of a way to get out on my own.

In my contemplation, along with Priscilla, we reached a conclusion.

We could induce Priscilla to go on a rampage.

A rampage, in this context, referred to raw mana bursting out uncontrollably.

I could use Priscilla this way regardless of this room's unique ability to disrupt one's ability to control mana.

The problem was that doing so might destroy me.

“By any chance… how far along is the magic circle for calming the mind?”

“Huh?”

To be honest, it was a shameless question.

Asking about its progress just two weeks in could be considered impolite.

Yet, I believed in Luna's potential and so I asked.

“It’s mostly complete, but…”

Luna trailed off.

“There are some parts I need to modify. I did get some help from Professor Mcguire when I came here, but…”

Her gaze shifted back to me.

“Should we… try it here?”

I met her eyes.

“I told you before, it was going to happen at some point.”

I had been thinking a lot since then, especially while I was alone.

The elemental rampage was an inevitable occurrence.

But what if I intentionally triggered it?

Wouldn’t that change the events to come?

If the future where the elemental goes on a rampage is set, then that future won't change.

But if there's a way to alter that eventuality?

If I personally set it off, then wouldn't that prevent it from happening afterward?

That was the thought I clung to.

I initially planned to test this once both Rie and Luna had finished their magic circles, but there was no time for that now.

“Luna, can you make it as quickly as possible?”

Luna pondered my question for a moment.

Then, lifting her head, she looked at me with determined eyes.

“I'll try, Rudy.”

Luna said with a confident voice.

CHAPTER 95
WINTER VACATION (11)

Thud!

From the deep pit, a hand emerged.

A figure then clambered out.

It was Ian.

"Damn it…”

Ian cursed as he pulled himself out of the pit.

Once he found stable ground, a realization hit him.

He had been played.

And once he fully regained his senses, all the illusions that surrounded him disappeared.

All that remained was a single magical tool next to him, frantically digging into the ground.

Ian then tried to use teleportation magic to escape, but it failed immediately.

It was due to a device previously set up by Professor Mcguire, designed to obstruct spatial coordinates.

Ian gritted his teeth.

He had always relied on the overpowered teleportation spell and hadn't bothered to learn other forms of movement magic.

But now that teleportation was sealed, there was no quick way out of the pit.

So he chose to use physical enhancement magic to crawl his way out.

It would undoubtedly take time, but it was his only option.

After what felt like an eternity, Ian managed to crawl out.

Eventually, Ian managed to crawl out, covered in dirt, looking anything but the successor to a dukedom.

Once he was out, he noticed a piece of paper laid out in front of him.

Written on it was a single word:

-Pathetic

"This damn…"

Ian crumpled the paper in frustration.

Looking around, he spotted various magical tools scattered about.

Who had done this?

However, he had no time to figure that out.

He had to make his way to the hut.

Had they already rescued Rudy?

Rescuing someone from that place wouldn't be easy.

Judging by the magical tools that had fooled him, this person was an experienced wizard, one who firmly believed in their abilities.

These wizards tend to be overly confident in their abilities.

Rescuing Rudy from inside the hut would be even more challenging due to this.

Magic couldn't be used inside and cutting through the bars would take a long amount of time.

Ian recalled the magic circle he had prepared in advance.

It was a combination of space magic and various others, designed to nullify any magic within its boundaries.

If he could get inside the hut in time, there might still be hope.

"Rudy…"

Who could he possibly have asked for help?

As Ian tried to head towards the hut, he suddenly stopped in his tracks.

A rumbling sound echoed.

The ground vibrated, almost like a seismic event.

"What now?"

The illusions had surely faded.

But then, what was causing this rumble?

Crash!

A colossal, furry, silver hand burst through the hut.

The hand, covered in sharp fur, resembled that of a beast.

As the hand emerged, the ground shook even more, revealing the creature the hand belonged to, as it tore its way out from beneath the earth.

The ground upheaved, sand flowing away like it was being stripped from the very form of existence.

A creature sprinted on four legs, its eyes ablaze with crimson fury.

Its appearance resembled that of a wolf.

"Krrrrraaaaaa!"

The wolf bared its entirety and let out a howl, head tilted to the heavens.

“What on earth is that?”

Ian stared at the creature, disbelief written all over his face.

Did such a monster just emerge from that shack out of nowhere?

'Am I still in an illusion?'

All sorts of thoughts crossed Ian’s mind.

“Huh?”

Something cold touched Ian's face.

He looked up.

Dark clouds began to shroud what was once a clear sky.

Snow started to drift down from above.

Thud!

The wolf, now closer, took a step toward Ian.

As the wolf's foot touched the ground, the spot froze over rapidly.

Its overpowering presence made Ian involuntarily step back.

Ian looked down at his retreating foot.

"Did I just… back away?”

He was taken aback that he felt fear against such a creature.

Gritting his teeth, Ian reminded himself there was no reason to be afraid of it.

Just a mere…

Ian reached out towards the giant wolf.

"Space Rift."

Crack!

He unleashed his spatial magic.

The space around the wolf distorted.

The wolf's head and body seemed to separate, its legs shattered, looking like a broken glass bottle.

Ian smirked, reveling in his accomplishment.

"Thought I had a reason to be scared, did you…"

But before Ian could finish, the shattered wolf started to melt, as if it were made of liquid.

Soon enough, the wolf began to reform itself.

"…It's regenerating."

Ian's gaze sharpened.

"Then I'll make sure to destroy you until you can't recover."

Drawing even the deepest reserves of his mana, the trees around Ian swayed violently and a fierce wind swirled around him.

-

At that moment.

"Rudy, are you okay?"

"Cough…"

Luna, supporting Rudy, was making her way through the forest.

She had succeeded in creating the magic circle as advised by Professor Mcguire.

But, there was a problem.

Even if she could heal Rudy, she couldn't stop the elemental, Priscilla, from rampaging.

As soon as the elemental rampage began, Priscilla would rapidly drain Rudy's mana, and she wouldn't stop until all of his mana was exhausted.

When Luna expressed her concerns, Rudy smiled weakly and said,

-It's okay. Isn't there someone who can stop her?

The person Rudy was referring to was Ian.

And indeed, things played out just as Rudy had predicted.

Priscilla and Ian began to fight fiercely.

Luna seized the opportunity to quickly escape with Rudy.

"Rudy…"

Rudy's current condition was dire.

Having triggered Priscilla's rampage and sustained significant injuries, Rudy was bleeding profusely, especially since he had summoned Priscilla in an underground dungeon, causing him to be scraped by jagged rocks.

As a result, even walking with support seemed to be a struggle for him.

"Rudy, I'll carry you. Let me."

"Ugh…"

Luna made this offer, but Rudy couldn't respond properly.

Without waiting, Luna gently lifted him up.

"Physical Enhancement."

After using the physical enhancement magic, Luna carried Rudy on her back.

He was much taller than her, so she had to hold him awkwardly, but it didn't hinder her movement.

"But where to…"

She looked ahead, contemplating.

“Where should we go…?”

She wasn’t sure where Professor Mcguire was, and there wasn’t a designated safe spot to head to.

The ideal place would be the Royal Palace, given its central location in the capital.

It would be safe, especially with the presence of Princess Rie.

But there was a problem.

Without notifying Princess Rie, who would receive them at the Royal Palace?

That was the issue.

Still, there was no other place to go.

"Rudy, for now, we'll head to the Royal Palace."

Rudy, in his unconscious state, couldn’t reply.

"Please hang in there, just a little longer…"

Still, hoping to comfort Rudy even a little, Luna whispered to him.

As Luna tried to move swiftly out of the forest, distant noises gradually became audible.

“Huff…”

Luna quickly took cover behind a tree.

She then peeked toward the source of the noises.

Among the few soldiers, she recognized Thomas from the academy.

“The Astria family…”

For reasons she didn’t know, he, accompanied by several soldiers, were approaching the forest.

“Ugh…”

Luna pondered on their next move.

It didn't seem like a good idea to reveal themselves.

‘Rudy… ’

Luna looked at Rudy’s face, which was deathly pale, devoid of any vitality.

Anyone could tell that the situation was dire.

If she were alone, Luna might have been able to escape.

"Should I… distract them…?"

Luna considered hiding Rudy behind a tree and diverting their attention elsewhere.

But then, there would be no one to look after him.

"How can I…”

She anxiously bit her nails, racking her brain for a solution.

But she couldn't think of anything.

While she was deep in thought, something slowly descended in front of Luna.

It was a rope.

"Huh?"

A rope, inexplicably dropping from the sky.

Confused, Luna looked up at the tree from which the rope had descended.

A masked individual, clad in black, stood there.

"Wh… who are you?"

At Luna's whisper, the figure gestured towards the rope.

"Grab on?"

In response to Luna's question, the masked figure nodded.

Who could this unexpected savior be?

"Check over there."

It was Thomas's voice.

The footsteps of soldiers grew closer.

Closing her eyes tightly, Luna gripped Rudy and the rope.

The rope swiftly lifted them, allowing Luna and Rudy to reach the treetop safety.

"There's no one here."

"Alright, let's move on."

Luna watched with relief as the soldiers who were searching their previous location moved on.

Turning, she looked at their unexpected rescuer.

Behind the person floated Sylph, an Intermediate Wind Elemental.

An Elementalist.

But why the mask and dark clothing? An assassin or some kind of covert agent, perhaps?

Regardless, Luna bowed her head in gratitude.

"Thank you. I don't know who you are, but you've saved our lives."

Who this mysterious helper was didn't matter at the moment.

All Luna knew was that this person had saved them.

"Princess Rie sent me. Said you might need some help."

Hearing the voice, Luna was taken aback.

It was a woman's voice.

Upon closer inspection, the mysterious helper was delicate in stature, and tufts of blue hair peeked out from beneath the mask.

The casual tone caught Luna off guard, but she brushed it off as a part of the woman's personality.

Carefully, Luna spoke,

"I promise to repay this favor someday."

The masked woman shook her head.

"No need. I'm just here to apologize for my mistake."

“…Mistake?"

The woman removed her mask.

“…Se… Serina?"

A striking blue-haired Elementalist.

The shining star of Liberion Academy's Elementalist Department.

Yet, the same Serina who had been imprisoned on charges of attempting to murder Rudy.

Seeing Serina's face, Luna wasn't sure how to feel. After all, Serina had once severely injured Rudy.

'However, you did save us now… '

"You don't need to make that face. I only want to make it up to Rudy Astria and the others, nothing more."

Serina smiled faintly.

"And I can't afford to harbor ill feelings. If I did, I might just end up dead."

"Dead?"

Luna was full of questions.

However, before Luna could voice any of them, Serina hoisted Rudy onto her back and rose to her feet.

"We'll talk more about it when we get back."

"Get back?"

"To the Royal Palace. Princess Rie asked me to take you there."

Serina flashed a warm smile.

CHAPTER 96
WINTER VACATION (12)

The capital was in an uproar.

Suddenly, a wolf monster appeared, and Ian was the one who confronted it.

It was an incident that occurred on the outskirts of the capital a few days ago.

At first glance, the situation painted Ian as a hero.

However, an additional event overshadowed that.

The kidnapping of Rudy Astria.

Ian had kidnapped his younger brother, Rudy Astria, and confined him.

When news of this spread throughout the capital, Ian Astria's reputation began to plummet.

Despite saving the capital from a massive beast, he started being seen more as a villain who imprisoned his brother than as a hero.

And now, within the royal palace of the capital, Rie was walking somewhere from her chambers.

"Oh, long time no see, sister."

While Rie was walking, Yuni approached and greeted her.

Yuni's attire suggested she was either attending a ball or some other formal event.

Rie looked at Yuni disdainfully.

"Aren't you starting school soon? Shouldn't you be studying?"

At Rie's words, Yuni chuckled.

"Come on, I can't just be studying all the time. Taking walks, having tea — it helps me study better."

"So, you're saying that by taking walks, drinking tea, hanging out with friends, and attending every ball, you study better?"

Yuni shrugged nonchalantly in response to Rie's sarcastic comment,

"I have my own way of doing things~."

"Then stick to your way~. And don't bother me with it."

Rie spoke coldly.

Despite Rie's icy words, Yuni waved her hand cheerfully and teased,

"Why so harsh, sis?"

Any average person might've been hurt by Rie's words, but Yuni was accustomed to her sister's sharp tongue.

Rie was about to continue on her path and ignore Yuni when Yuni suddenly clapped her hands, as if remembering something.

"Oh right, I didn't approach you for idle chit-chat."

But Rie didn't stop and continued walking.

"Where are you off to?"

Yuni followed closely behind.

"Don't follow me. I have somewhere to be."

"Going to meet 'him'?"

At Yuni's words, Rie stopped in her tracks, taken aback.

Seeing Rie's reaction, Yuni widened her eyes.

She had never seen her sister so easily thrown off by a simple statement before.

'Him' referred to a guest Rie had brought in.

"I heard a bit about it. He's a man, isn't he?"

"You don't need to know."

Rie quickly regained her composure and answered Yuni flatly.

"Hmm… is he your boyfriend, then?"

"What, what, what???"

Rie stared at Yuni in shock.

Yuni smirked, seeing Rie's reaction.

"Is that it?"

"No! How did you jump to that conclusion?"

Rie exclaimed, then looked around to ensure no one was within earshot.

"Either way, stop prying. If you keep digging, I won't let it go easily."

With that, Rie resumed walking.

Yuni stared intently at Rie's retreating back.

"Hmm… who could he be?"

Yuni mused aloud, tapping her lips thoughtfully.

While she was curious about the identity of the man, Yuni knew that her father, the Emperor, was ensuring his safety and privacy.

Even Yuni couldn't defy the Emperor's wishes.

"I'm so curious."

With that thought, Yuni went on her way.

-

"Rudy, how are you feeling now?"

Rie asked.

“I think I’m all better now.”

Sitting on the bed, I gave her a reassuring smile.

We were at the Royal Palace, specifically in one of its guest rooms.

These rooms, splendidly decorated, were intended for honored guests of the palace.

"The doctor will be visiting again later, just so you know."

"I feel like I don't really need any more treatment."

It had been about three days since I arrived at the palace.

For a whole day, I was unconscious; the next, bedridden and sleeping.

But after receiving treatment from the royal physicians on the third day, I was able to move around again.

Once I could move again, I paid my respects to Rie and the Emperor.

The Emperor acknowledged me, promising protection.

While it might be a political move to counter Ian Astria, I was still grateful since he guaranteed my safety.

Luna was also staying in the palace.

She wasn't injured, so she didn't require treatment; they just provided her with a place to stay.

Though we could meet, it wasn't always easy to find a private moment.

At the moment, I am under the direct protection of the Emperor.

It made spending time together difficult.

Thankfully, through Rie, we could pass along messages to each other.

I heard that Professor McGuire met separately with Rie.

After hearing that Luna and I were under the protection of the Royal Palace, he quietly returned to the academy.

I wanted to thank him immediately, but I decided to wait until I returned to the Academy.

As these thoughts crossed my mind, there was a knock at the door.

“It's Serina. May I come in?”

“Yes, come in.”

Rie responded.

Serina?

It had been a while since I heard that name.

I assumed it was just a coincidence.

There are many people with the same name in this world, after all.

"Huh?"

However, to my surprise, the woman with blue hair who entered was the Serina I knew.

Although she wasn’t in the usual school uniform, there was no mistaking it.

"What… is going on?"

Confused, I looked between them.

Rie noticed my expression and spoke,

“Oh, didn't Luna tell you?”

I shook my head.

My meetings with Luna were short, and her concerns for my wellbeing often took precedence over other topics.

“Serina has become a member of the Royal Secret Service. I did oppose it initially, but…”

Rie admitted, casting a slightly disapproving glance at Serina.

But Serina just bowed her head modestly.

"I received assistance from ‘Ling’."

"'Ling'?"

"It's the code name for the head of the Secret Service,"

Rie explained, answering my question.

"When Serina asked to become an undercover agent, that person came to me directly to request it. They wanted Serina to take on that role."

Oh…

I was genuinely impressed by that.

"So, her crimes were pardoned?"

"No, instead of being in prison, she works undercover to atone for her sins."

I nodded at Rie's explanation.

"That's great news. Work hard."

When I said this with a smile, Serina approached and bowed her head.

"I deeply regret not properly apologizing for my mistakes that day. I sincerely apologize for everything. It was entirely my fault…”

"Ah, it's alright. It's been some time since then."

I assured her, smiling.

Yet, Serina kept her head down, refusing to look up.

"I'm really… really sorry…”

I looked at her intently.

I had a feeling that no matter what I said, her attitude would be the same.

"Serina."

I decided to take a different approach, because, regardless of my feelings, she still had a life to live.

"Look, I won't forgive you. You almost killed me, and you tried to kill Astina too."

"I understand. I don't expect you to forgive me for the rest of your life."

I continued after hearing her response.

"Instead of seeking my forgiveness, live your life trying to make amends for the mistakes you’ve made."

I said with a light-hearted smile.

"Save many people and bring salvation to many. With your abilities, you can do it, right? Live with the purpose of atoning, always."

As I said this, Serina slowly lifted her head.

"I promise… I will."

I scratched my cheek.

It felt a bit awkward.

Just a few months ago, we were on casual terms, and now she was addressing me so formally.

Rie broke the slightly uncomfortable silence.

"But you said you won't forgive her?"

"Huh?"

"Serina saved your life. If it weren't for her, you might have died. Isn't that why you are here?"

My eyes widened at Rie's words.

Serina saved me?

Suddenly, I felt embarrassed about the things I had just said.

Realizing my mistake, I immediately apologized,

"I'm sorry. I'll forgive you. Thank you for saving me…"

"No, it's me who should apologize more!"

-

After that slight hiccup,

"Priscilla! It's been so long!!"

"Serina, I've missed you!"

Feeling guilty about my earlier words to Serina, I summoned Priscilla.

I remembered how upset Priscilla had been the last time we talked in prison.

I thought letting her see Serina might ease her resentment.

But to my surprise, Priscilla started grumbling to Serina,

"I missed you, Serina. I should have just formed a contract with you. He's worse than a demon."

"Just hang in there, you already made the contract."

Serina gently stroked Priscilla as if comforting a puppy.

And Priscilla, despite her wolf-like appearance, gleefully responded to Serina’s touch.

It was almost like watching a playful pup.

I even wondered if I should take her for a walk later.

CHAPTER 97
WHEN WINTER ENDS, SPRING COMES (1)

"Do you enjoy this sort of thing?"

"Experiencing freedom is the greatest pleasure for those who lack it. Those who are always free wouldn't understand this exhilarating feeling."

I stared intently at Priscilla.

Despite her words hinting at something profound, when I actually looked at her, she seemed like nothing more than a 'dog' taken out for a walk.

Priscilla was joyfully hopping around in the snow-covered garden.

After seeing her play with Serina, I thought to treat Priscilla like a ‘dog’ and decided to take her for a walk in the garden.

It seemed to be the right decision.

She panted excitedly, much like a delighted dog, sniffing around.

I watched her for a while, then wandered around the garden myself.

"It's cold…”

The biting chill was sharp, but it wasn't entirely unpleasant.

I enjoyed the sensation of snow crunching underfoot, and taking a deep breath filled my senses with the crisp winter air.

"Hmm… Perhaps it's time to head back to the academy?"

My injuries were healing, and I no longer felt discomfort while moving.

From the whispers I overheard, Ian likely doesn't have the time to be focusing on me.

So, the likelihood of him attacking me again seems slim.

It felt like the right time to return to the academy.

While Rie made sure I was comfortable here in the Royal Palace, I had to return to the academy eventually.

I had to get back to my studies.

Just then, a voice called out from behind me.

"Feeling better now?"

Turning around, I faced an elderly man with deep wrinkles and a long beard.

Recognizing him, I promptly bent one knee in reverence.

"Your Majesty, the Emperor, it's an honor."

The man in front of me was the ruler of this empire, Rie's father, the Emperor.

"Heh, rise. I didn't come here to make you uncomfortable."

The Emperor spoke with a gentle smile.

Looking at him, he seemed to be dressed casually, possibly out for a walk himself.

As I stood up, the Emperor, still smiling, said,

"Care to walk with me for a bit?"

"Of course."

He gestured to the maids behind him to stay back.

"Is the palace to your liking?"

"Thanks to your kindness, Your Majesty, my stay has been very comfortable."

The Emperor glanced at me with a gentle smile,

"I'm glad to hear you've been well."

I laughed awkwardly, and silence ensued.

I wanted to escape this situation quickly.

Despite him being Rie's father, he was also the ruler of the Empire.

I had to be cautious; any misstep would be disastrous.

In situations like this, it seemed best to stay silent and stand still.

With that, the Emperor began to speak gently.

“How is Rie faring at the Academy?”

I bowed my head and replied,

“Yes, Rie is doing quite well at the Academy. She's doing great both in the student council and in other aspects.”

"Heh, that's a relief to hear. I've always been a bit concerned given her fiery temperament."

“Ah, yes…”

Like the time she fiercely struck down an assassin's head with a stone at the midterm camp…

While I was lost in such thoughts, the Emperor posed another question.

"What do you think of her?"

"Pardon?"

“I mean, not Rie as the First Princess or a member of the student council at the Academy, but just Rie as herself.”

I was taken aback by the question.

My opinion of Rie?

After some contemplation, I responded sincerely,

“Rie… is a dear friend.”

I continued,

“She can sometimes be naïve, and her impulsive actions can be startling. But she's someone I deeply trust and have high hopes for."

Hearing my response, the Emperor smiled warmly.

"That's a wonderful assessment."

I smiled back, albeit awkwardly.

The Emperor looked at me, then turned his gaze to the sky.

"I don't have many days left to live."

“…?”

This sudden proclamation made me tilt my head.

The Emperor indeed seemed aged, but he still appeared healthy and strong.

"However, knowing that someone like you stands beside Rie eases my concerns."

“…Thank you."

I bowed to the Emperor's words.

The Emperor gave me a gentle smile.

"I have a favor to ask of you. Would that be alright?"

"Of course. Please, tell me."

The Emperor's expression grew serious.

"I'm not too worried about Rie. She's strong and surrounded by many who care for her."

His face shadowed with concern.

"But Yuni isn't the same. No one truly looks out for her, they only see the power she wields."

The Emperor met my gaze.

"I won't ask you to do anything specific for Yuni. Just prevent the two of them from fighting. If they clash, Yuni might…"

He couldn't complete his sentence, but I understood the gravity of his words.

I was well aware of both Rie's nature and the kind of person Yuni was.

"I understand. I'll do my best."

"Heh, I trust you will. But…"

The Emperor wore a playful smirk.

"Who confessed their feelings first?"

"Pardon?"

"Hmm, as Rie's father, I believe I have the right to ask that."

"…?"

I found myself growing increasingly flustered.

-

In the northern region, within the territory of the Lucarion family, the Lucarion estate was buzzing with activity.

A meeting was in full swing.

“…The Rebel's influence continues to grow, and we're struggling to find a way to curb it."

The harsh climate of the north was riddled with monsters and was notorious for its scarcity of food supplies.

The head of the Lucarion family, along with his heir, Locke, had much to discuss.

Certainly, the conflict between Rudy Astria and Ian Astria in the central region was concerning, but for them, there was a more pressing issue at hand: The Rebels.

These rebels, who had once been active in the south, had now made their presence known in the north.

Furthermore, these rebels were winning over the locals by distributing food.

Such gestures, although temporary, were undoubtedly effective in swaying public sentiment.

The Count of Lucarion, Locke's father, was well aware of this tactic.

He had long-standing experience dealing with the complexities of the northern region and was not ignorant of these strategies.

However, the reason the Lucarion family refrained from such acts was because they only provided a momentary boost to public sentiment.

A lord should prioritize the sustainable development of his territory.

A short-term spike in popularity achieved through food distribution wouldn't solve any long-term issues.

Therefore, investing the same resources in strengthening the foundation of the territory was a far better decision.

Such an approach was ideal for a lord, but not for the rebels.

The rebels' immediate priority was to quickly secure the loyalty of the majority and shift the balance of power.

Given this, countering the rebels, who were freely distributing food, was challenging.

The Count of Lucarion finally spoke up,

"First and foremost, we need to apprehend these rebels as soon as possible."

A knight present at the meeting cautiously replied,

"However… for now, all they've done is distribute food. They haven't caused any harm or committed any crimes."

The Count nodded in understanding.

"Regardless, we must arrest them. If they possess any food, don't bring it to the castle. Distribute it among the people instead. It's the best we can do right now."

The knight seemed to disaprove of this command, but he bowed in acknowledgment.

"Understood. We'll carry out your orders."

The Count then turned his gaze to Locke,

"Locke, do you have a different opinion on this matter?"

Locke, who had been seated next to the head of the family, deep in thought, responded cautiously,

"May I ask a question?"

At the Count's nod, he continued,

"It's strange that merely distributing some food would so drastically shift public sentiment. Hasn't our family protected these people from monsters for decades? Haven't we helped them during famines?"

The Count stroked his chin, acknowledging Locke's point.

"You're right. Even considering the winter food shortages, this sudden shift in loyalty seems unusual."

Rising from his seat, the Count of Lucarion gazed out of the window, lost in contemplation.

Outside the window, the agitated citizens of the territory could be seen.

Even with the food distribution, it made no sense for the citizens to react this way.

"I'll investigate this matter as well."

At the knight's words, Locke nodded.

"Thank you."

After hearing Locke and Count Lucarion's words, the knight walked out of the mansion.

Once outside, he glanced around.

Making sure no one was nearby, he walked towards a dark alley.

In that alley stood a man.

"Have you been well?"

"As always, I'm doing fine."

The man, raising his hood slightly, greeted the knight with a smile, a notable scar evident on his eye.

The knight spoke, looking at the man.

"Still… will you continue like this? Don't you know what kind of family the Lucarions are?"

However, the man with the scar on his eye shook his head.

"I apologize to Count Lucarion, but it's necessary for the greater good."

"Understood."

The knight bowed slightly and walked out of the alley.

CHAPTER 98
WHEN WINTER ENDS, SPRING COMES (2)

"As expected, this place feels the most comfortable…”

I stepped down from the carriage and stretched.

“In the Royal Palace, you were given many such conveniences too,”

Rie pointed out with a sharp gaze.

"Well, there's a difference between being provided with comfort and actually feeling at ease,"

I replied teasingly, shooting her a playful grin.

Luna chuckled awkwardly at our banter.

We had just returned to Liberion Academy from the Royal Palace.

Initially, only Luna and I planned to return.

However, out of the blue, Rie declared she'd join us back to the academy.

Some knights looked displeased by her decision, but I decided it wasn't my place to worry and simply smiled it off.

For the time being, we went our separate ways to our respective rooms.

Given the long tiring journey, I didn’t think it'd be smart to dive straight into my studies.

I entered my room.

Considering I had been, in essence, kidnapped and returned, I had no belongings to unpack.

“Sigh…”

Without anything to put away, I flopped onto my bed.

Even though I rested well in the Royal Palace, nothing beats the relaxation of one's own home.

Turning my head, my gaze landed on the calendar.

"A kidnapping episode, and the year has slipped by."

While under treatment at the palace, the year had changed.

I wasn't planning any special celebration for the New Year, but realizing the year had slipped by gave me a sense of loss.

More importantly, a new semester awaited.

Fresh first-year students, altered futures, and futures I would need to change.

Looking back, none of the incidents from the original game had happened as they should.

Still, I clung to the futures I knew.

But now, I couldn’t afford to.

“Evan…”

While I was able to handle the altered incidents, Evan’s very character seemed changed, and I was powerless against that.

First Seat.

During the final exams, Evan and I had tied for the top spot.

That wasn't supposed to happen.

No matter how hard I tried, Evan was supposed to be the prodigy, always one step ahead.

“Yet now…”

Having seen Evan’s limits, I couldn’t place my trust in him.

“I need to change things…”

I had to take charge.

I bore the responsibility for the altered future.

Not just to ensure my own survival, but to save everyone at the academy.

-

Several days later.

In the main building of Liberion Academy, on the third floor's women's restroom.

"Hmm…!"

A woman, dressed in a tailored suit, had her hair tied up in a ponytail.

She was tidying herself up in front of the mirror.

"Ah… I'm so nervous."

She playfully tapped her cheeks with her fingers.

She was Gracie Lifegold, a wizard who came for an interview for a new teaching position.

Originally, she had been a teaching assistant at the academy, but after an offer from the royal palace, she worked as a Royal Wizard for three years.

The title of Royal Wizard was a highly prestigious position one could achieve as a wizard without a formal title.

It was impressive that Gracie, a commoner, had been given the Lifegold surname during her tenure as a royal wizard.

However, she had a dream.

"I just want to relax a bit now…!"

Gracie wasn't fond of hard work.

Even magical research, which most wizards adored, didn't appeal to her.

Such research was okay only when done in a relaxed leisurely manner.

Even if one loved their work, doing it constantly without a break would inevitably lead to burnout.

Then came an opportunity for Gracie.

Vice Principal Oliver had been relieved of his duties

Professor Cromwell was forced into the position of Vice Principal, leaving his previous post vacant.

This led to an open recruitment for a new professor at Liberion Academy.

Believing she was fully prepared, Gracie exited the restroom.

"But… why does it seem so deserted?"

Gracie muttered to herself.

It felt strange.

She had assumed that the open recruitment would attract many applicants, but she saw no one around.

"My mentor did say the professor's position is highly sought after… that the competition would be fierce…"

Her mentor was none other than Professor Cromwell.

Before taking on the duties of Vice Principal, Cromwell had taken a vacation.

During this period, he met with acquaintances, spent time with his family, and wasn't just idling around.

He realized that with his promotion to Vice Principal, a position in the magic department would become vacant.

And if it wasn't filled soon, he'd have to juggle both roles.

With the determination to prevent that, Cromwell had searched for a suitable candidate.

And he had chosen Gracie.

"This is odd…"

Puzzled, Gracie continued walking down the corridor.

At the end of her path stood the principal's office.

Yet, even as she approached the office, she didn't encounter a single soul.

"Just what…"

Gracie felt something was wrong.

Before she could further ponder, the door to the principal's office swung open.

"Ah, Professor Gracie. You've arrived."

Principal McDowell greeted her warmly as he stepped out.

"Pro… Professor?"

Gracie looked baffled. She hadn't even had her interview yet, nor had any announcements been made regarding her selection.

However, Principal McDowell referred to Gracie as "Professor."

"Haha, come on in for now."

“…Yes."

Gracie hesitantly stepped into the Principal's office, feeling the tension in the air.

Gracie forced a smile and took a sip of tea.

A singular thought dominated her mind.

I need to escape.

I must find a way out of here as soon as possible.

A job with no other applicants.

An interviewer who implies you're hired even before the interview starts.

Clearly, it's the worst job scenario.

"Hmm, should I address you as 'Professor Gracie'? Or do you prefer being called by your last name?"

"Oh, just 'Gracie' is fine."

Gracie was clearly bothered by the continued addition of the title "Professor."

"Right. Some people don't like being addressed by their first names."

"Ah, you mean Professor Cromwell?"

Cromwell greatly despises being called by his first name.

That's why, even when introducing himself, he only reveals his surname, 'Cromwell.'

"Yes, you, being a Liberion Academy graduate, must know about Cromwell, right?"

"Yes, Professor Cromwell has been of great help to me."

"It's been about 6 years since you graduated… That means you entered as a freshman when I just assumed the position of principal?"

"Yes, I heard you assumed the position during my first year."

McDowell and Gracie chatted amiably.

For a while, Gracie wore a genuine smile.

Suddenly, McDowell checked his watch.

"Oh, look at the time."

Gracie, seeing McDowell's reaction, tilted her head curiously.

"Do you have somewhere to be?"

"Yes, I have plans with my family. I apologize."

"No worries. It was fun reminiscing about my academy days."

Lost in their conversation, time had flown by.

McDowell grabbed his coat and headed for the door.

"Just leave the teacup. My secretary will handle it. See you at work tomorrow, Professor Gracie."

“…What?"

Before Gracie could understand the situation, McDowell had vanished.

In shock, Gracie stared at the door where McDowell had disappeared.

"No, wait. I didn't say I'd…”

But McDowell was long gone.

There was no reply in the empty room.

Suddenly, a voice came from the side.

"Professor Gracie, here are the documents detailing your duties as a professor."

"Eh?"

A woman stood beside her.

Gracie took the documents the woman handed to her and said,

"Ah, you must be the secretary…”

Without acknowledging her realization, she asked,

"May I clear the teacup?"

"Yes, but…”

Gracie wanted to return the documents and decline the job offer.

But she swallowed those words.

After all, confronting the principal directly seemed more appropriate than using the secretary as a go-between.

Refusing the job through her would be impolite.

‘I need to speak to Principal McDowell first thing tomorrow.’

With that in mind, Gracie rose from her seat.

-

The very next day, as soon as she arrived at Liberion Academy, Gracie went straight to the Principal’s office.

“…Is he on vacation?”

“Ah, yes. Didn't he mention he'd be out with his family?”

Principal McDowell did mention he had plans with his family, but Gracie hadn't realized that meant he was taking a few days off.

"When will he be back?”

“He should return in about four days.”

"Four days…”

With that, Gracie turned her attention back to the documents she had received the previous day.

She then headed toward the research lab listed on the papers.

Four days wasn't too long to wait, after all.

“I guess I'll have to wait a bit longer…”

However, after those four days…

"Ah, Principal McDowell has other commitments and seems like he will be away from the academy for a while."

Sighing in disappointment, Gracie walked out of the Principal’s office.

“Now what should I do?”

She hadn't yet been properly briefed on her responsibilities, so she had nothing to do. Yet, no one seemed to mind her just hanging around the lab.

After several days, her mind began to waver.

“Maybe I should just…?”

However, she quickly shook her head, dismissing the thought.

“No, something feels off. It's as if they're trying to lure me into something…”

“Hey, isn’t that Gracie?”

She then heard a voice behind her.

“Oh? Professor McGuire?”

“Hey~! It's been a while!”

Professor Mcguire, who wore a broad smile, was one of the professors Gracie had been quite close to during her student years.

“Ah! You’re a professor now? Should I be calling you Professor Gracie?”

“No! Absolutely not. I can’t have you calling me ‘professor.’”

Gracie emphatically gestured with her hands as she spoke.

Seeing this, Professor McGuire chuckled,

“Haha, alright then! How about we grab a drink later? A heart-to-heart between two professors.”

“Sure! I’ll drop by your lab after I’m done for the day!”

A little while later, Professor McGuire and Gracie found themselves at a local bar…

“Hehe, Professor~! I promise~! I’ll follow your advice to the letter~!”

“Good, you better!”

Under the influence of the strong drinks and Mcguire's silver tongue, Gracie committed herself to taking on the role of a professor.

Without knowing this had all been a scheme orchestrated by the academy's staff.

CHAPTER 99
WHEN WINTER ENDS, SPRING COMES (3)

A month passed swiftly.

I had learned new intermediate spells, and my dark magic had significantly improved.

Both Luna and Rie made impressive progress in their own ways.

Luna can now effectively use Levian's spellbook, while Rie has not only improved her explosive magic but also learned other intermediate spells.

Even though we've changed a lot, the academy itself hasn't changed much.

However, it wasn't entirely the same.

The most noticeable change was…

Professor Robert's laboratory.

"Gracie, take care of these."

"Yes, Professor!"

The difference was that Robert now had an assistant.

To be precise, she wasn't just Robert's assistant but served all the professors in the magic department.

The youngest professor, Gracie Lifegold.

She's talented and very efficient, almost like a top-tier "slave" in the academy.

Teaching assistants, due to their limited capabilities, couldn't always be trusted with certain tasks.

And if they were overburdened, they might break under pressure.

When an assistant reached their breaking point, they would typically quit and run.

So it was important to moderate the workload.

However, professors didn't have that luxury.

No matter how overwhelming the workload, they couldn't just abandon their duties.

Being a professor often implied being older and experienced, so losing their position would leave a stain on their reputation.

It would be a significant setback.

As a result, especially for Robert, Gracie became a go-to for various tasks.

"Ugh…"

"Would you like me to help?"

I offered to Gracie, who was receiving a pile of documents from Robert.

She looked at me cautiously and asked,

"Are you Professor Robert's assistant?"

"No, I'm just a student learning under Professor Robert."

"A student?"

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Would you like to be my assistant? I promise I'll treat you really well! Truly!"

"Haha… I'm sorry, I'm quite busy at the moment."

"I see."

Gracie looked disappointed.

I felt sorry for her.

If she’s the youngest professor now, how long would she remain in that position?

From what I gathered, Professors Cromwell and McGuire had tricked her to join.

One could argue that she made a poor choice, but I heard that the professors essentially made it impossible for her to refuse.

They announced public recruitment for a professorship but didn’t consider applications aside from Gracie's.

McGuire constantly spoke of the benefits of being a professor, almost brainwashing her.

Who could resist under such circumstances?

I felt sorry for her.

Helping her out, I carried her documents to her lab.

"Thanks! I'll treat you to something delicious later!"

"It's alright. I should be going."

"Wait!"

Gracie stopped me,

"By the way, what's your name?"

I calmly replied to her question.

“It's Rudy Astria.”

As I stated my name, Gracie’s expression stiffened, and her hands began to tremble.

“I'm so, so, so, so sorry!!!!!!”

It took me several reassurances that I was just a student for Gracie to finally calm

down from her upset state.

“She seems really overwhelmed…”

On my way out from Gracie's lab, I ran into Luna and Professor Mcguire.

“Ah, Professor Mcguire, it's been a while.”

“Oh! Is that you, Rudy?”

As I greeted him warmly, Professor Mcguire responded with a bright smile.

There was genuine happiness radiating from his grin, a side of him I hadn't seen before.

“Yes! Anyway, Luna, you can start coming to the lab from tomorrow!”

“Understood, Professor! I'll see you tomorrow!”

Huh?

I watched the retreating back of Professor Mcguire as he returned to his lab, somewhat puzzled.

Luna then tilted her head, posing a question.

“Rudy, are you headed to study?”

“Well, yes, but… what’s this about coming to the lab?”

Something felt off.

“Ah~ Professor Mcguire asked if I was interested in working as a teaching assistant.”

“Oh.”

I sighed upon hearing that.

“Wait… you agreed to it?”

“Yes! The other teaching assistants are very kind, and I’ll get paid too! Plus, I can study at the same time, so it seemed like a great opportunity.”

Luna was so naïve.

She didn't realize that such great conditions always come with a catch.

The academy wasn’t a charity…

Well, in some ways it was, but the professors certainly weren't philanthropists.

“Did you… sign a contract or something?”

“Yes! I just did.”

“…”

Now I understood why Professor Mcguire looked so elated.

I felt a bit of pity for Professor Gracie, but I hadn’t expected someone to take advantage of someone close to me the same way.

For a moment, I considered confronting Professor Mcguire.

But I quickly dismissed the idea.

Luna should learn through experience.

It’ll prepare her for the realities of life.

It’s better for her to understand society through hardships, just like Professor Gracie.

“By the way, Rudy, did you hear about the freshman assessment in a few days? It reminds me of the old times.”

Luna spoke, reminiscent of the past.

I hadn't taken the entrance exam, so I didn't share her nostalgia.

Still, I responded,

“I agreed to help with the exams.”

“Really? Why would you do that?”

Assisting with the exams involved supporting the supervising professors.

It was primarily a way for students to earn a little extra money.

However, I had my own motives.

To assess the new students.

To identify potential talents for the next semester.

“Should I help out too?”

“No, Luna, you already have the teaching assistant role… you should rest.”

I looked at Luna sympathetically.

“…?”

Luna simply looked back, puzzled.

-

“Ugh…”

Ian exhaled a weary sigh.

The incident involving Rudy Astria.

The aftermath of that event was almost over, but he was very tired from it all.

Fortunately, Rudy's kidnapping went by without much hassle.

However, it undoubtedly had a significant impact.

For one, the evaluation of Ian had taken a considerable hit, while Rudy's reputation in the capital had skyrocketed.

Where Rudy had once been seen negatively, the tide of public opinion had turned in his favor.

The rumor that he was a failure was now falsely attributed to Ian, and Rudy was now seen as the poor younger brother who had been oppressed under such a brother.

From Ian's perspective, this was deeply unfair.

It was a well-known fact that Rudy had been the black sheep of the family.

Ian had done nothing wrong.

Yet to have these rumors attributed to him was nothing but unjust.

Moreover, the stories that were initially confined to the academy had now spread to the capital.

The charming nobleman who got along well with both aristocrats and commoners alike.

Rumors of how he was close to Rie, the Royal Princess, despite his family being part of the nobility.

The brave student who risked his life to protect others.

Such tales spread like wildfire.

Though Ian was too preoccupied with his own reputation to understand why these rumors were circulating, the cause of their spread was Astina.

Astina had started to take proper successor lessons and began to harness the power of the Persia family.

With her influence and due to recent events, once the stories spread, all of the nobility quickly came to know of them.

From Ian’s perspective, these rumors were poison.

He even started to think that his almost assured position as the heir could be in jeopardy.

In the world of politics, a secured position was often anything but.

Currently, Ian held power and influence over Rudy.

The Astria family held the backing of the noble faction.

The foundation of that noble faction was rooted in the Astria family.

The families under them also had their vulnerabilities tied to the Astrias.

Given that Ian was currently acting as the Head's representative, he already held the power to influence them at will.

Still, Ian didn't dismiss the thought of 'what if'.

There's no harm in being prepared for any eventuality.

"However…"

The Rudy kidnapping incident had just passed.

If he stirred up another issue now, and it led to complications, it might be too much for Ian to handle.

"I'll have to start with minor things."

The kind of actions that wouldn't raise eyebrows.

That level of discretion was important.

"The minor details…"

Ian sank deep into thought.

Areas that might seem petty.

He needed to exploit those areas.

Areas where even if Rudy tried, he wouldn't easily expose to the public…

-

A few days later, a letter arrived for me.

It was from Ian.

I had half-expected an apology from him, thinking perhaps he felt remorseful.

In a way, my assumption was half right, but also half wrong.

"Seriously, this guy…"

While there was an apology in the letter, that wasn't the main content.

"He's cutting off financial support?"

I was dumbfounded.

The reasons he listed were petty, ones anyone could nitpick.

Apparently, he wanted me to stand on my own feet.

However, there was no clear way for me to object.

If I were to oppose my own brother telling me,

'You should become independent. I'll reduce your allowance,'

Wouldn't I just appear like a spoiled child?

"What a tricky move."

I thought Ian would either apologize sincerely or stay silent. But this was unexpected.

Now, I had to figure out how to earn money to pay for tuition and living expenses on my own.

Tuition wasn't as much of a concern since I had a scholarship for being second in the rankings.

But the real issue was…

"How will I handle Luna's sponsorship?"

Moreover, other financial matters all became burdensome.

"Ian, you petty bastard…!”

Cursing Ian wouldn't change the situation, but I couldn't help it.

CHAPTER 100
WHEN WINTER ENDS, SPRING COMES (4)

"Alright, everyone, put away whatever you're looking at!"

The entrance examination for the new students had begun.

All the freshmen sat in their seats, looking forward.

A tense silence filled the room.

Assisting Professor Gracie, I began distributing the exam papers.

As I did so, murmurs started spreading through the hall.

"Is that Rudy Astria…?"

"Shush, keep it down…"

Given the events I've caused, it seemed I had inadvertently become a bit of a celebrity.

Before, few recognized me on sight.

Only when I introduced myself as Rudy Astria, or when it was clear I belonged to the Astria family, did they recognize me.

But lately, more and more people seemed to recognize me at a glance.

It made sense.

I heard that recently, I am the most talked-about figure in the capital.

Blocking Vice Principal Oliver, being the object of Ian Astria's jealousy, and being cherished by the Royal Court.

The rumors were quite exaggerated.

All twisted tales.

Robert had stopped Vice Principal Oliver, not me.

Ian Astria wasn't jealous; he merely wanted to cut down any potential nuisance.

And as for being the most cherished figure in the Royal Court?

I had no idea where that came from.

Sure, I was on good terms with Rie, but being the most cherished figure?

Thump, thump.

As the students continued their whispered discussions, Professor Gracie tapped her podium a few times and spoke.

"Everyone, stop chatting with your neighbors. If you continue to talk, it will be treated as cheating."

Hearing Professor Gracie's stern words, everyone stopped their conversations and focused ahead.

I took a moment to watch Professor Gracie, then resumed distributing the exam papers.

Once I finished handing out the papers and returned to Professor Gracie's side, she quietly asked,

"So, when do we start the exam?"

I sighed.

How could a professor not know this?

That was Professor Gracie for you.

Exceptionally skilled in magic, but lacking in almost every other area.

Gently, I informed her,

"Professor Mcguire will announce the start soon."

Upon hearing this, Professor Gracie nervously nodded.

"Oh, right. Understood."

The reason I was assigned to assist Professor Gracie?

Initially, I was supposed to enter the exam hall with Professor Robert.

-Why am I paired with Professor Gracie?

-Well, Gracie is a bit clumsy, so you should help her out. You're pretty familiar with this, aren't you?

I scratched my head.

What exactly was I familiar with?

I'm just a regular student, and I've never supervised an exam…

All I had was the experience of taking midterms and final exams.

But, what choice did I have?

I prayed that nothing would go wrong as I entered with Professor Gracie.

The clock began to glow.

Professor Mcguire signaled the start of the test with a magic tool.

"……"

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.

However, Gracie didn't even glance at the clock, merely tapping her fingers on the podium.

I stared at Gracie with disdain before speaking up.

"Alright, the test will now begin."

"Huh?"

Gracie looked at me with a surprised face upon hearing my words.

I gestured toward the clock with a tilt of my head.

"The… manual…"

Gracie spread out the paper with the instructions on it, letting out a sigh of realization.

"Ah…"

She gave me an awkward smile.

"Ahaha… Times have really changed… Back in my day, the teaching assistant in the hallway…"

I cut off Gracie's words with a stern look.

"Please be quiet. The test is in progress."

"Yes…"

Gracie, deflated, took her seat as the supervisor.

-

"Alright, well done everyone. You can have your lunch now and return to your original seats afterward."

With those words, Professor Gracie announced the end of the first exam.

I approached her, asking,

"Did you gather all the test papers properly?"

"Of course!"

Professor Gracie confidently replied, handing me the envelope filled with exam papers.

However, as she began to turn away, I walked past her and pointed,

"Then what is this?"

"Huh?"

A stray exam paper lay on the floor.

It was smaller in size compared to the others.

Since students took multiple tests during the first examination, the sizes of the papers varied.

In the process of collecting and organizing them, it was common for a few sheets to get lost in between and fall.

Clearly, this fallen test was one that Gracie had accidentally dropped while collecting them.

"If you had missed this, it could've been a problem…"

I commented.

"I'm sorry…"

Professor Gracie replied with a defeated expression.

With a sigh, I picked up the stray paper and placed it inside the envelope.

"Let's go and submit these papers."

"Yes, let's…"

As we exited the classroom, I saw Professor Mcguire chatting with Luna.

"Hello, Professor Mcguire!"

Professor Gracie greeted with a smile.

He turned to acknowledge her, asking,

"Ah, Gracie. Did supervising go well?"

"If it weren't for Rudy here, there might have been a slight hiccup. Ahaha…"

Walking over, Gracie began chatting with Professor Mcguire.

Luna approached me with a bright smile,

"Rudy! How was supervising? Wasn't it a bit fun? Reminded me of the old days!"

"It was interesting, I guess."

Seeing Luna's cheerful face, I couldn't help but smile in return.

Luna had taken up an assistant role beside Professor Mcguire.

Given the limited student volunteers for the supervising role, and since Professor Mcguire was also participating, Luna filled in.

Some might view it as unfair, but Luna seemed quite content with the arrangement.

And looking at Luna recently, I had to admit, she seemed to be doing well.

She was earning money and receiving valuable lessons from Professor Mcguire.

It seemed like a win-win situation.

It might not be the same in the future, but for now, it looked promising.

Still, I thought,

"If I were in her shoes, I might not feel the same way…"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Ah, it's nothing."

Luna tilted her head curiously but soon flashed a playful grin.

As we followed behind Professors Mcguire and Gracie, Professor Mcguire glanced over his shoulder,

"You two should grab some lunch and return soon."

"Yes! Understood!"

Luna cheerfully responded.

I gave a slight nod in acknowledgment, and we headed to the cafeteria.

The dining hall was bustling with new students.

"It's been a while since I've seen the cafeteria this packed,"

I remarked.

"Yeah. By the way, where's Rie today?"

"Oh, Rie said she'd sleep in. She finds it tiring to come out when it's this crowded."

It made sense.

If Rie had come to the cafeteria, she would undoubtedly have been the center of attention for all the freshmen.

Just like over there.

Upon entering the cafeteria, a group of students immediately caught my eye.

Right in the center was Yuni Von Ristonia, Rie’s younger sister.

A face similar to Rie's.

While Rie had long hair, Yuni sported a short bob.

I wondered why they were all huddled together like that, but it was good for us.

Everyone's attention was diverted from us, allowing Luna and me to eat in peace.

We casually got our meals and settled in a corner of the cafeteria, chatting as we began to eat.

However, the murmuring around us gradually grew louder.

And when I looked up, the reason became clear.

"Rudy, what's going on?"

Luna tilted her head in confusion as she saw my frown.

I had a reason to frown.

That person was approaching our table.

"Hello there?"

Yuni.

She walked over with a gentle smile and greeted us.

As Yuni approached, not just her but even the people around her started moving towards us.

In an instant, we were surrounded by a crowd.

"Wha… What's this all about?"

Luna looked around, clearly taken aback.

"Rudy Astria, right?"

Yuni leaned in slightly, speaking in a playful tone.

It reminded me of when I first met Rie.

Seeing my silent stare, Yuni continued.

"Pleased to meet you. I am the Second Princess, Yuni Von Ristonia. May I join you for a meal?"

Her introduction was impeccable, radiating dignity and grace.

After being accustomed to the more casual Rie, seeing her younger sister's formal demeanor made for a stark contrast: the carefree older sister and the courteous younger one.

Of course, Rie also acted gracefully when she needed to.

"Sure, have a seat."

"Yes, then…"

As Yuni began moving with her tray from Luna's side towards me,

Thud.

Luna pulled out a chair next to her.

"Why not sit here?"

"…Excuse me?"

Luna responded with a smile.

While it looked like her usual smile, there was an uncanny edge to it.

Yuni locked eyes with Luna.

"Why are you going all the way there? Here is closer, isn't it?"

"I wanted to sit next to Rudy."

"Just sit here."

At Luna's words, Yuni frowned.

"Who are you, exactly?"

Before Luna could reply, I intervened.

"She's my friend, Luna Railer. Do as Luna suggests. Why would you want to sit next to me anyway?"

Wouldn't it be better to face someone directly if you wanted to talk with them?

Yuni responded with a sly smile.

"You see, I have a crush on Rudy."

“…What?”

“Huh?”

After making her declaration, Yuni briskly walked over and sat next to me.

And once seated, she spoke again.

"I fell for you at first sight, Rudy. Will you go out with me?"

-

Luna sat on the bench, looking up at the sky.

-I have a crush on Rudy

She confessed.

-I fell for you at first sight, Rudy. Will you go out with me?

She said, wearing her heart on her sleeve.

Of course, Luna knew.

She knew Yuni most likely had ulterior motives.

Still, hearing someone else confess to the person she liked weighed heavily on her

heart.

"Sigh…”

While she could somewhat cope with the shock of Yuni's confession, Rudy's response was even more jarring.

-I'm sorry, but I can't accept your feelings. Let's remain as senior and junior.

Such a practical and gentle rejection.

Luna would have preferred it if Rudy had been more blunt in his rejection; it might have lessened the shock.

The reason this felt so jarring to her was that she believed Rudy might respond in the same manner if she ever confessed her feelings to him.

She could vividly imagine herself in Yuni's shoes, confessing… only to be met with the exact same words from Rudy.

Luna imagined it.

Her confession… and Rudy rejecting her with those exact words…

It played in her mind like an echo.

"Rudy…”

With a heavy sigh, Luna whispered Rudy's name.

CHAPTER 101
WHEN WINTER ENDS, SPRING COMES (5)

Flowers are beginning to bloom.

The seeds that were buried in the snow are slowly sprouting, stretching their tiny shoots towards the sun.

Leaves were starting to sprout from trees, adding vibrant colors to the academy.

I was taking a stroll, admiring my surroundings.

"The weather's nice."

“It truly is! I usually prefer winter, but now that we're outside, spring doesn't seem too bad!"

I glanced at Priscilla who made that comment.

Right at my feet, in the form of a wolf, was Priscilla.

I was taking a walk with her, upholding a promise I made while we were in prison: to show her more of the outside world and to take care of her.

Perhaps because of that, I've felt that Priscilla has been in high spirits lately.

But, in contrast to her joy, my own worries have multiplied recently.

To be exact, it’s not that I have more concerns, but one particular worry that's been bothering me immensely: money.

The ways to earn money while living at the academy are few and far between.

Occasionally, the academy would hire students for short-term contractual jobs and pay them, but that pay was nowhere near what I needed.

To continue to grow and improve, I need to do my own personal research and experiments.

However the funds needed are beyond what an average student can afford.

For now, I'm managing with the money given by my family, but that amount will soon be exhausted.

My current research especially requires a significant amount of money.

Dark magic often uses catalysts; magic that requires a sacrifice.

I've been delving deep into studying this kind of magic.

With Professor Robert's help, I've been making good progress, and on my own, I've been purchasing various materials to practice.

However, practicing alone has become increasingly challenging.

When learning with Robert, he'd simply toss me the ingredients he had in his lab. On my own, I had to buy them. I now understand why Evan might have struggled to maintain the top rank, unable to reach the required specs.

For now, my immediate need is to earn money that would sustain me for a while.

But the ways to earn it are limited.

The most obvious option is to become a teaching assistant.

In fact, it's perhaps the only viable option for me.

"Becoming a teaching assistant, huh…"

I began contemplating it earnestly.

Of course, I had no intention of becoming Robert's assistant.

He already had a few assistants, and given Robert's personality, if I became his assistant, he'd definitely dump all his work on me.

The professor I was considering was Gracie Lifegold.

Despite being a professor, she was quite lenient.

She doesn't even have a proper assistant right now.

I'm sure Gracie would eagerly welcome me.

"But…"

There's a catch…

If I were to go by my plan…

"Senior? Hello?"

I heard a voice from behind me.

I turned with a frown, recognizing that voice.

Behind me, Yuni was standing with a smile.

"Out for a stroll again today?"

The semester hadn't begun yet.

Although it was about to, the freshmen hadn't arrived.

Typically, noble students would arrive accompanied by their families for the entrance ceremony.

However, unlike them, Yuni had already moved into the dormitory.

Honestly, I didn't mind her moving in early, but the real issue was her constantly following me around lately.

Like when I would take morning walks with Priscilla or when I studied at the library, she'd always show up just to say hi.

Even when I asked her to stop, she would merely smile and say,

"I'll come by again."

At first, it was very bothersome.

She would constantly hover around, staring intently, making it impossible for me to ignore her.

But, recently, I found a solution.

"Yuni, what are you doing?"

From behind, Rie, dressed in comfortable sportswear, approached.

She came over with a bright smile.

"Tsk…"

Seeing Rie, Yuni frowned.

"Senior! Then, I'll come back later."

"You don't have to."

Despite my words, Yuni just smiled and left.

Yuni's natural enemy.

That was Rie.

Whenever Yuni sought me out, Rie would find me soon after.

And she would promptly chase Yuni away.

After numerous repetitions of this routine, it became a new normal.

Especially during morning walks with Priscilla, Rie joining us became a part of the routine.

Rie, seeing Yuni's retreating figure, turned to me with a broad grin.

"Shall we get going?"

"Sure."

I began jogging through the academy grounds with Rie.

Priscilla, too, gleefully followed.

Of course, we weren't running at full speed.

If I ran too fast, Rie wouldn’t be able to keep up.

I adjusted my pace to match hers.

At first, even at this pace, Rie struggled.

She wasn’t used to exercising.

But lately, she's been managing to keep up, keeping her breathing steady without breaks.

"Whew… Whew…”

After a while, we were nearing the end of our usual running route.

"Rudy."

Rie, slowing down a bit, started to speak.

"Hmm?"

I glanced at her, tilting my head.

"What’s up?"

It didn't seem like she was tired or wanted to stop.

Rie stared at me intently for a moment, then began to speak softly.

"Do you want to join the student council with me?"

"What?"

"I plan to run for student council president. I'd like you to be my vice president."

Rie's sudden proposition caught me off guard.

"We haven't properly organized the student council since we haven't seen the first-year students yet, but I'd really like you to take on the role of vice president."

Rie continued her proposal.

"I've been watching you since you started working in the student council. You're good at what you do… you're approachable… someone I trust…"

"Hold on."

I interrupted Rie as she spoke.

"There's… a slight problem."

"Huh?"

Rie's eyes widened in surprise at my words.

I gave an awkward smile.

"I'm also running for student council president."

"What?"

Rie looked completely taken aback by what I had just said.

"Oh, I'm not saying I won't participate in the student council… I'll just be running for the position of president."

I nodded.

Taking the position of student council president was the beginning of my plan for this school year.

To completely alter the narrative centered around Evan.

I needed to shift the entire flow of this academy.

And for that, I needed power.

The kind of authority that could sway the academy.

The first step to gaining such power was to secure the student council president's seat.

It was the only position that provided vast information access, and the legitimate authority to influence the academy.

Of course, I knew that Rie intended to run for the position.

That's why I was hesitant to tell her.

We'd become opponents after all.

Still, it was a conversation we had to have eventually.

"So… have you decided who you'd want in the student council if you win?"

Rie stumbled over her words, still processing the situation.

"I haven't finalized it yet. But I have a few in mind."

The entrance exam for freshmen.

That was why I was there.

After the exam, I approached a freshman named Kuhn.

He was an alchemy student with a remarkable talent for both magic and alchemy.

A prodigious talent held back by his commoner status.

I met him and asked him to join the student council I was planning to form.

He left without saying much, but I was set on bringing him into the council.

Apart from him, I didn’t have anyone else in mind.

If it didn't work out, I even thought of placing Luna in a Vice President kind of role.

“Ugh…”

Rie was deep in thought.

And then, with a frustrated expression, she blurted out.

“Just take the Vice President position! Let me be the President!!!”

“I don’t want to.”

“It’s almost the same thing anyway!!!”

“Then why don't you become the Vice President?”

“Ugh…!!!”

Rie glared at me, fuming.

The conversation felt childish.

Like a squabble between little kids.

No matter what Rie said, I wasn’t going to change my mind.

Of course, things would be more comfortable if Rie were the student council president.

We got along relatively well, and she respected my opinions.

But that didn't mean there were no issues.

In the end, if I wanted something done, I would have to ask her.

The decision to act on it would be hers.

Having the position of student council president allowed me to act freely and do as I pleased.

"So, let's have a fair competition for the student council presidency."

I offered my hand to Rie.

However, Rie stared at my hand for a moment before opening her mouth.

"I don't want to…"

"Huh…?"

"I said, no."

I was taken aback by her response.

"So, you're saying you're not going to play fair and rig the election?"

"That's not what I'm saying!"

Rie protested, giving my stomach a playful jab.

"Then what is it?"

"…"

Rie lowered her head, continuing to jab at my stomach.

"Hey, that's starting to hurt."

Upon hearing this, Rie stopped and looked up.

And then she spoke.

"I'll be the Vice President…"

"…What?"

Rie exclaimed with a frown.

"I said, I want to be the Vice President!!!"

"…???"

What was she talking about?

I looked at Rie with surprise.

It was completely unexpected.

I never asked Rie to be Vice President because I knew she'd never want to be beneath anyone due to her personality.

Or at least, that's what I thought.

Rie shook her head, seemingly irritated.

"In one of our assessments, I realized that competing with someone you know is really unpleasant. I already have enough opponents; why would I fight against someone who's supposed to be on my side? I absolutely hate it."

Rie said with determination.

"Let's do it together. The student council."

I stared at Rie, completely taken aback.

CHAPTER 102
WHEN WINTER ENDS, SPRING COMES (6)

Robert's Laboratory.

With an uncharacteristically serious expression, Robert stared at the document in his hand.

This was a report about the Fred family territory, a place Robert recently visited.

Although he had initially approached them for something else, it unexpectedly led to a more significant discovery: the connection between Levian and the Fred family.

The Fred family had been crafting magical tools since ancient times.

Naturally, crafting such tools requires magic circles.

In this process, a link to Levian, a master of these circles, was discovered.

Among the findings was Levian's research material stored within the Fred family's archives.

And this wasn't just any regular research.

"Damned fiends…"

Robert muttered under his breath.

Prominently mentioned in the documents was something deeply unsettling: human sacrifices and experiments related to magic tool creation.

Instead of conventional methods, they had tools crafted by sacrificing humans.

Details revealed that Levian's name was involved, indicating his participation in this disturbing research.

The timeline of this research began approximately three years before Levian's disappearance and concluded precisely on the day he vanished.

Robert though deeply.

The magic book that Luna possessed from Levian.

Could it possibly be a result of this research?

However, there was no definitive proof.

The essential parts of these research materials were encrypted, making it difficult to understand the exact nature of the work.

From what he could piece together, after fleeing, Levian ended up in the Railer family territory without anything other than the magic book Luna now holds.

Meanwhile, the Fred family aggressively looked for him.

Piecing all of this together, the only plausible conclusion was that Levian had run away with the results of his research.

"But something doesn't add up…”

Assuming Levian had run away with the research results, why didn't the Fred family have their own copies?

The research logs showed that Levian wasn't working alone; there were traces of the Fred family's involvement.

Logically, the Fred family should've been able to reproduce the research results on their own.

Yet, they hadn't.

Instead of pursuing the research independently, they only pursued Levian.

While it was understandable they might be wary of Levian potentially leaking the research, it was strange that the Fred family hadn't created anything themselves.

Even if Levian held some unique knowledge, he'd disappeared almost 7-8 years ago.

With the resources and expertise at their disposal, the Fred family should've been able to continue and possibly complete the research.

But they didn't.

They abandoned the research the moment Levian disappeared.

Robert wondered: why would they make such a choice?

And then…

"Why did he say that to me?"

'You, who couldn't overcome your curiosity and greed, using human lives for magic. You cannot be my disciple.'

The words Levian had once said to him.

Right after the funeral of his own son, he said those words.

That moment was roughly a month before Levian disappeared.

Levian wasn't the only one who dabbled in the forbidden magic that took human sacrifices.

Robert had also tried his hand at it.

As a result, Robert lost his noble title, his mentor, and his son.

In a short span, he lost everything.

To live and to shake off his grief, he wandered battlefields.

There wasn’t a battlefield teeming with monsters where Robert wasn’t present, anywhere blood was spilled, he was there.

In such dire times, it was his friend Cromwell who came to his aid.

Thanks to Cromwell's suggestion, Robert could join the academy as a professor, allowing him to stay there till now.

With McDowell’s help, he managed to keep his past a secret.

But the widely-known incident involving his once-famous son couldn't be kept a secret.

Still, Robert accepted this calmly.

He knew he was to blame for his actions.

"Haah…”

Robert set down the documents with a heavy exhale.

Levian's face flashed in his mind.

His mentor, who had once abandoned him.

To think that he did something similar…

No, something even worse than what Robert had done, made anger course through him.

"That damn fool…”

Robert's words were filled with anger, sorrow, and a profound sense of loss.

-

The day before the entrance ceremony.

"Senior~."

Yuni approached, calling out my name.

"How do you always know where I am?"

I frowned as I addressed Yuni.

I was at a training ground on the outskirts of the academy.

A place seldom visited.

I had chosen this secluded spot, thinking it would be spacious enough to practice magic.

But, as always, Yuni effortlessly found me.

"Well, I have my ways,"

Yuni said with a playful smirk.

I stared at her, then looked around.

"Why do you keep coming here if you're just going to run away when Rie shows up?"

"Ah, I won’t be running today."

I narrowed my eyes at her statement.

Yuni, noting my expression, pointed towards the academy's main building.

"Sis is meeting with Cromwell right now."

I frowned at her casual tone.

"Regardless of how close you are, refer to him as 'Vice Principal.' Calling him without his title is a bit disrespectful, isn’t it?"

She pouted,

"What's with 'Vice Principal'? His name is Cromwell, so I call him that."

While I felt her point was somewhat valid, it still felt proper to show respect.

"But shouldn't you at least use an honorific? Rie addresses him formally, you know."

"Nah, I like my way."

She stuck her tongue out slightly.

Though I was tempted to give her a gentle knock on the head, I held back, considering the repercussions of handling a royal body in such a manner.

"But I'll keep calling you 'Senior*' since you seem worthy of respect!"

"Thanks," I said.

I wanted to ask, 'What do you know about me to deem me more respectable than Professor Cromwell?' but refrained, realizing it would only lengthen the conversation.

"Anyway, stop visiting so often. You always come and just… watch."

I grumbled at Yuni.

Lately, her frequent visits meant I developed a habit of postponing tasks until after she left.

It was more efficient that way, given how distracting Yuni could be.

"Can't I just come to see someone I like?"

She tilted her head, wearing a mischievous grin.

"Stop lying. It's obvious."

As I said this, Yuni slowly walked towards me.

Stopping right in front of me, she looked up directly into my eyes.

"What does 'liking' even mean? Isn't it just what one feels?"

She asked with a playful smile.

I just shook my head.

"It's not that simple."

"Can you define love, Rudy?"

"I can't define it, but I'm sure what you're feeling isn't love."

Upon hearing my words, Yuni pouted and stepped back.

"You're quite the heartbreaker, aren't you? Even when a girl expresses her love like this, you continue to reject her."

"Think whatever you want."

As I tried to end the conversation, Yuni stopped pressing the issue, seemingly losing interest.

Regardless of whether Yuni was watching, I returned my focus to my original task.

After a while, Yuni, looking slightly tired, took a seat on a nearby bench.

From there, she attentively watched my every move.

-

After a significant amount of time had passed,

"Phew…"

I finished preparing the magic.

A spell that uses mana stones as a medium.

Although it's an expensive spell—consuming one mana stone for a single use—its effectiveness is undisputed.

I was in the midst of testing it out.

Typically, all you needed for this spell were a mana stone and your own body.

However, I brought along some protective gear and some items just in case, causing the preparation to take longer than expected.

Having completed all preparations, I stole a glance behind me.

Yuni was on the bench, curled up with her legs folded.

Despite yawning and wiping away a tear, probably out of boredom, she remained in her spot, continuing to watch me.

I doubted the magic would affect Yuni, given the distance between us.

After all, this was a summoning spell.

I began to channel my mana, wrapping the mana stone with it.

The mana stone was encased once, then twice, and again and again.

Soon, the multi-layered mana stone began to emit a radiant glow.

But as it grew brighter, cracks started forming on its surface.

Timing it perfectly, I chanted,

"I Summon thee, Behemoth."

Just as the sea has Leviathan, a demon governing the waters, the earth has Behemoth, a demon governing the land, capable of utilizing abilities related to all minerals, soil, and terrain.

Behemoth was one of the higher-ranking demons that could be summoned through dark magic.

With Professor Robert's guidance, I managed to get a rough understanding of it.

However…

"Ugh…"

A powerful gust of wind suddenly blew, and the ground cracked open to reveal Behemoth emerging from the rift.

The figure of Behemoth emerging from the torn ground…

"Pwoo…”

"Oh my, how cute."

…was a tiny elephant.

The very elephant that had protected us during our battle with Vice Principal Oliver.

Its true identity was none other than Behemoth.

But instead of the colossal form that Robert had previously summoned, what stood before me now was an elephant no bigger than the fist of a grown man.

“…Is this considered a success?”

“Pwoooh~~~!!”

However, the elephant's reaction seemed off.

It appeared to be stomping its foot as if it were angry.

I slowly approached the behemoth.

And then I spoke.

“What's bothering you?”

“Pwoooh! Pwoooh!! Pwoooh!!!”

What is it saying?

“How dare such a weakling summon me! Someone of your caliber has no right to call upon me!”

From behind, Yuni spat out these words. I turned to look at her.

“…What are you doing?”

Yuni didn't respond to me but just kept staring at the elephant… no, the behemoth.

“Pwoooh! Pwoooh!”

“Summoning me, of all beings! It's a disgrace to our lineage!”

Yuni seemed to be interpreting the behemoth’s cries.

Rubbing my chin, I looked at Yuni and asked,

“You can understand what it's saying?”

I pointed at the behemoth as I spoke.

Yuni looked at me with a puzzled expression.

“No? I just tried guessing. How could anyone understand what ‘pwoooh pwoooh’ means?”

Yuni replied as if it was obvious.

“…”

All I could do was stare blankly at her.

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